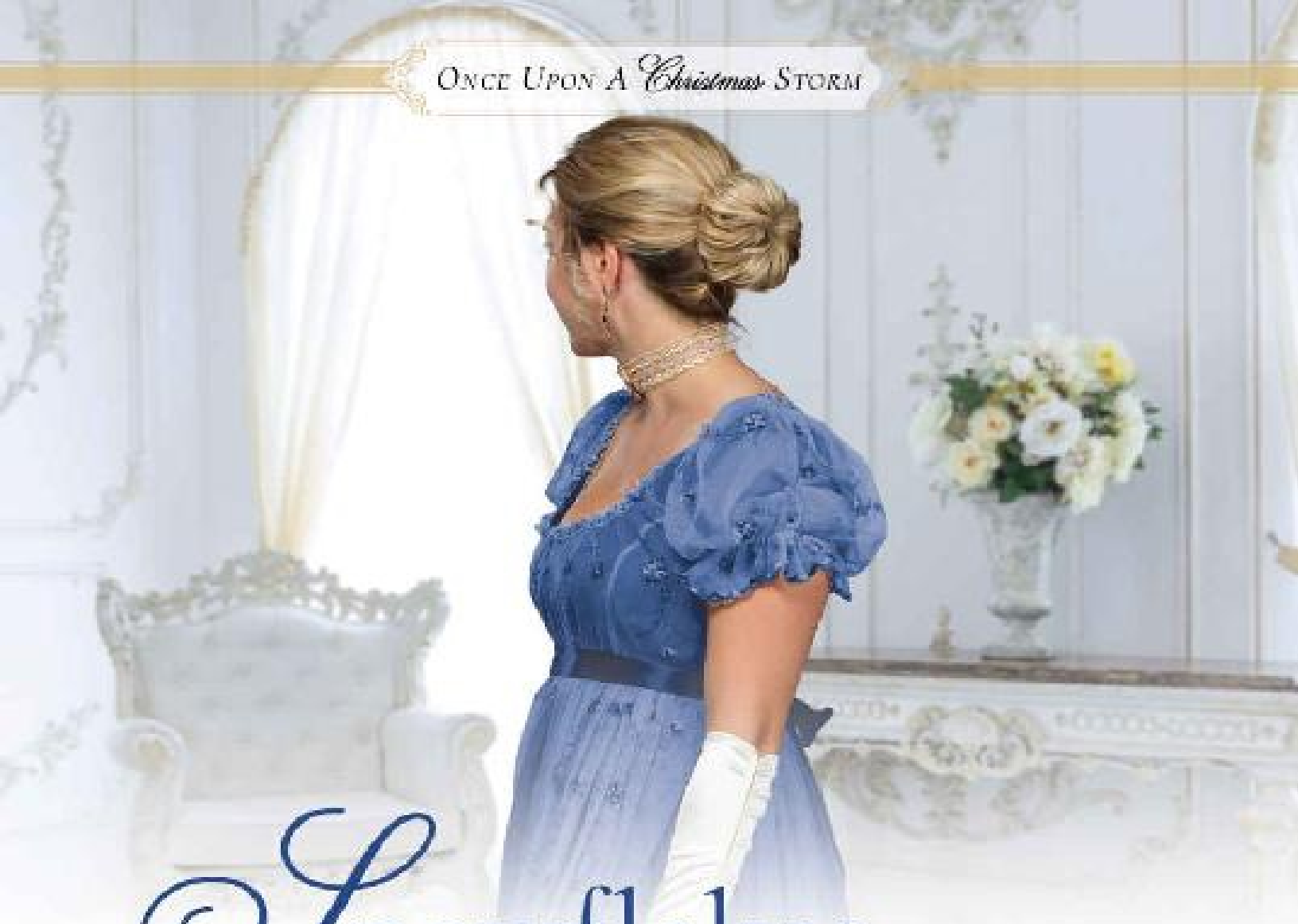


ONCE UPON A *Christmas* STORM

A woman with blonde hair in a bun, wearing a blue dress with puffed sleeves and white gloves, stands in profile looking out a window. The room is ornate with a white chair and a vase of flowers.

Snowflakes
and
Shenanigans

A large, classical-style building with columns and a pediment, set in a snowy winter landscape. A snow-covered evergreen tree is in the foreground on the left.

AUDRA WELLS

Snowflakes
and
Shenanigans

ONCE UPON A CHRISTMAS STORY

AUDRA WELLS

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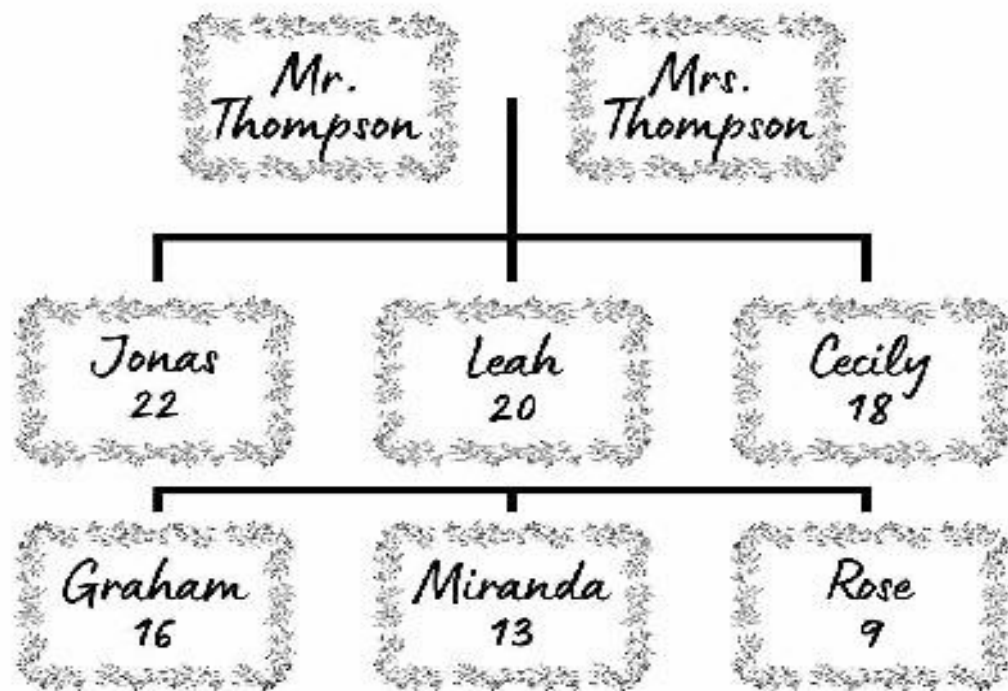
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Also By

The Thompson Family Tree



Chapter 1

LEAH. MORNING OF THE FIRST DAY.



Leah watched as the snow fell, each white flake a perfect, frozen design of beauty . . . and oh, how she hated every single one. Her trunk was currently being packed, or she would have the footman load the carriage now and be on her way to Amelia's home. It was not a long trip, perhaps only a mile, but at the rate the snow was falling, she was not sure the carriage would be able to make the trip at all. As it was, she could no longer see the grass, which did not bode well for her plans.

Leah's heart sank deeper as the snow piled up at an alarming rate, dashing her hopes of escape. She had planned to enjoy a nice weekend at Amelia's before Christmas day. Not only would she get to spend time with her closest friend, but she would also escape being in the same house as Owen. Now, it looked as if she was going to be forced to suffer through the experience with as much aplomb as she could muster—which she feared would not be much at all.

“You are going to ruin your fingernails if you keep at that.”

Leah turned her head at the voice, pulling her fingers away from her mouth and clasping her hands together in her lap. Realizing it was only her brother, Jonas, she shook her head and looked back out the window. “Amelia will not care if my fingernails are not up to snuff.”

A shadow appeared in her periphery, and Leah spared Jonas a quick glance. He leaned against the wall next to her, gazing at the accumulating snow with a grin. “No, but Owen might have something to say about it.”

Just hearing Owen’s name made Leah’s spine stiffen. She pulled her fingers back to her mouth, giving one more decisive chew just to show Jonas what she thought of Owen’s opinion. Jonas only laughed, leaning closer to the windowpane as if that would help him better discern the state of her plight.

“You might be able to make it still,” he began. “Have Mr. Ashley load up the carriage now.” He shrugged, crossing his arms over his chest and jerking his head to flip a stray lock of hair from off his brow. He had done so for years, and no matter how much their mother nagged him to simply cut off the stubborn follicle, he refused. Sometimes Leah wondered if he did it just to make a point. He was his own man, and no one could tell him how to dress or live his life.

“Rebecca is finishing packing my trunk as we speak. However, I fear she will not finish in time for me to get to Amelia’s without becoming stuck.”

Jonas turned so his back flattened against the wall, pulling his foot up behind him. “I suggest you cut your losses and get your trunk in the carriage now. How many dresses does one girl possibly need to visit a friend?”

“If the snow becomes too cumbersome, I will leave tomorrow. Surely I can survive one evening in Owen’s company.”

Jonas chuckled. “Now that you are older, you should probably refer to

Owen as Mr. Turner.”

Leah stared blankly out the window, cringing as a strong wind swept up a white cloud of snow so thick she was unable to make out the barren apple tree that stood only a stone's throw from the house.

“That is fine by me.” Leah began to pull her fingers back to her lips, but quickly set them down on the windowsill. She knew how horrid a habit it was and had years of reprimands to keep her from chewing her nails. Only on rare occasions did she find herself doing it, and the thought of suffering through Owen’s company was apparently enough to make her forget years of careful practice.

“Oh, come now,” Jonas said. “Owen is not so bad. Can you not let bygones be bygones? You have both grown a fair bit since you last saw him.”

She turned to Jonas, her lips tight. “Did he somehow become a likable human in the span of four years?”

Jonas tried to hide his smile by running his hand across his face. “He has always been likable. He was only a young boy playing harmless tricks.”

“Harmless?” She blurted, standing and walking away from the horrid view of her plans being dashed to shreds. “He tripped me and caused me to fall into the mud. Ruining a perfectly lovely dress, might I add.”

“And how old was he when he did this?”

She glared at him as he continued to lean lackadaisically against the wall. “It does not matter his age. As the son of a gentleman, he knew better. *Any* boy should have known better. Though, I suppose he is a more recent gentleman than others.”

Jonas’ smile faded slightly as his eyes encouraged her to acknowledge her silly grudge. “How old, Leah?”

She took a deep breath, gripping her skirt. “I suppose he would have been

twelve at the time.”

“And how old would he be now?”

She narrowed her eyes. “You know very well how old he is.”

“Yes, I do. I am only checking to be sure that *you* do.”

She inspected her nails, seeing what damage she had done earlier. Luckily, there was only a slight fray to the edge of one or two. “He would be about twenty-two years of age. The very same as you.” Leah was only two years younger than Jonas and Owen, and thus had suffered through their antics more than any other sibling.

“Yes. And he is a grown man with a career now. I am sure he will not be pulling your pigtails or tripping you—”

“Or putting snails in my dollhouse?”

Jonas attempted to keep his face straight, but inadvertently snorted out a laugh. “Yes. Or that.”

Leah strained her neck to look over Jonas toward the view out the window. “Perhaps I will go and see if the carriage has been loaded. I may still be able to make it.” She turned and headed toward the door.

“You are going to become stuck,” Jonas yelled after her.

Better to try and fail than to not try at all.

“Leah,” a young voice whined as she entered the hall.

She kept moving, not wanting to lose a moment. “Yes, Rose?”

Her youngest sister trailed behind as Leah hastened, Rose’s little feet shuffling to keep up. “Did you see Miranda with my watercolors? She said she did not use them, but I know for a fact that she did. And now she has lost them!”

Leah shook her head. “I’m sorry, Rose, truly I am. But I cannot take the time to question Miranda about her bad habits of taking things that are not

hers and not returning them.” A habit which Leah had been victim to numerous times herself.

“But, Leah,” Rose whined.

“Another time!” Leah turned and ran up the staircase, hurrying to her room where she found her maid closing the lid of the trunk.

“Oh, wonderful.” Leah sighed. “You have finished. Could you have Mr. Ashley come and retrieve the trunk to be loaded as soon as possible?”

Rebecca cast a quick glance at the snow before addressing her. “Are you sure you wish to make the trip? The weather does not look pleasant in the least.”

“I would like to try.”

Rebecca nodded, her mouth scowling, then quickly scurried out of the room.

Rebecca’s exit was quickly followed by the entrance of another of Leah’s sisters. “You know, if I wasn’t so excited about seeing Owen again, I would consider going with you to Amelia’s. I haven’t seen her in weeks.” Cecily leaned against the wooden frame. Her golden hair was pinned neatly with a few tight curls about her face as her eyes roamed about Leah’s things.

“I find I do not enjoy sharing my friends with you,” Leah said, teasing. Being only two years younger than herself, Leah and Cecily’s friends often ran in the same circles. “I shall count it a blessing you do not join me this time. You may see Amelia again very soon. And since I do not wish to see Owen, or rather, Mr. Turner, I shall happily be on my way.”

Cecily sighed. “Very well. I suppose I can pester Graham for a time.”

“There. How very fortunate for him as I am sure he has been missing you.”

The girls shared a glance before they both erupted into a laugh. Graham, smack dab in the middle of all six siblings, often preferred seclusion to social

settings.

Leah finally strode toward the door, giving Cecily's arm a quick squeeze before making her way to the stairs.

After a few short minutes, Mr. Ashley and another servant loaded Leah's trunk onto the carriage. The wind was biting, even through her cloak and muff, but she straightened her spine, refusing to show her growing doubt that they would make it. Perhaps that was one of her greatest faults in life. A strong streak of stubbornness that refused to be proven wrong. That—and the fingernails.

“Miss Thompson?”

Leah turned to see their coachman holding out his hand to help her up into the carriage. “Do you think the roads will be passable?” She grabbed his hand, ducking her head as she stepped into the relative protection inside.

When she was seated, the coachman gave her a nervous smile. “I suppose we will find out.”

Chapter 2

OWEN. MORNING OF THE FIRST DAY.



Owen stared out the window, his temperament freezing over just as the rest of the world outside. He did not wish to spend his Christmas stuck at an inn. All of his plans— playing silly games, eating delicious food, putting on extravagant and ridiculous plays—began to drift away. Spending Christmas with the Thompsons was supposed to be the highlight of the winter, but now it looked as if he would be spending the holiday alone in a dark and slightly smelly inn.

How long would the storm last? If it was only one day then he could manage. But what if it continued on for numerous days? He would have to return to work at the end of it all, whether his time was spent at the inn or the cheerful Stonehill. Father was understanding, but business did not run itself, and Owen would be expected back in a timely manner. And business was the very reason Owen was at the inn in the first place. He had worked the entirety of the day yesterday, making his arrival in Carterton too late to be polite.

Thus, he decided to stay one night at the local inn and arrive the following day.

He strode from the room, making his way down the narrow and creaking staircase to the front desk where a heavy, middle-aged man sat, scratching himself at his leisure.

“Excuse me,” Owen asked. He tried to ignore the man’s itching skin, but had to withhold a cringe as he heard the rough scraping of nails against dry skin. “Are there any places I could rent a horse?” Owen spared a glance at the man’s hand, running along his forearm, before refocusing on his own task. A carriage would certainly not make it in this weather, but a horse should be able to make the short jaunt with ease. Owen would only have to spare his trunks for a day or two until they could be delivered. Surely Jonas would have things that he could borrow.

“Aye.” The man sat up, pulling his shirt down and transferring his scratching to his neck. “But can you not wait a day? It looks mighty awful out there.”

“I would like to get to my destination on time. I only have five days before I must return home.”

The man nodded. “Very well. You will have to walk down the street to Morrison’s place. He will have a horse you can use.”

“Thank you.” Owen slapped his hand on the counter in his excited relief before dashing upstairs for his jacket, then out into the bracing cold.

The wind whipped the end of his scarf, but he burrowed deeper into his jacket, making his way to Mr. Morrison’s. The establishment seemed clean and orderly, bolstering Owen’s hopes for a decent mount.

“My best mare is ole Bessy here.” The owner gave the mare’s rump a slight slap. “She isn’t fast, but she will get you where you need to be without any

fuss.”

Owen sighed in relief. “Thank you. That is just what I need.”

“Where are you headed in this weather?” The owner leaned, glancing out a small window toward the ever-accumulating snow. “Hopefully not too far.”

“No, not far at all.” Owen took the horse’s reins. “Only two miles.”

The owner turned back to him. “Aye? What brings you to Carterton?”

Owen smiled as he imagined his arrival at Stonehill. It was sure to be filled with hugs and shoulder slugs and overall Christmas cheer. “I am visiting family.”

The man nodded. “I see. What family would that be? I know everyone.”

“The Thompsons?” Owen saw a flicker of recognition pass over the owner’s face as he nodded.

“Are you related to them? Cousin?”

“Well.” Owen nudged a mounting block with his foot, feeling a bit foolish. They were not actually his family, no matter how much they felt like it. “We are not family by blood. Merely by acquaintance.”

“Acquaintance with Mr. Thompson? Or one of his sons I presume, judging by your age.”

“His eldest son Mr. Jonas Thompson.” Owen bobbed his head. “But all of them, really. I used to live here before my father sold his estate and moved to Banbury to be closer to work.”

The man’s mouth turned down, his eyes slowly scanning Owen. “Lived here you say? What’s your name?”

“Owen Turner. My father has a shop in Carterton.”

“Ah, yes. That’s it.” The man snapped fingers as he looked up in thought. “The glass shop.” He settled himself comfortably against a wooden beam. “I was surprised when your family sold Meadow View.”

“It was a sad day, to be sure. But business expanded and Father wished to be close enough to manage the new store in Banbury.”

“Of course. Good business sense.” The man nodded before seeming to remember what Owen was there for. “Well, I won’t keep you. Welcome back to Carterton. I hope you enjoy yourself.” He rubbed the horse's neck. “And be good to Bessy here. Have a servant from Stonehill return her when possible if you don’t mind.”

“I will.” Owen smiled, leading the old mare outside. She pulled back on the reins as the cold wind flew through the open stall door. “Come on, old girl.” Owen pulled a little harder, but Bessy only resisted more.

The owner laughed, slapping his leg. “Seems even old Bessy won’t go out in this weather. You sure you don't want to delay your travels?”

Thoughts of warm fires, hot chocolate, and all the Thompson’s smiling faces filled his head. “No. Not even a little.” And then he gave Bessy’s reins one last tug.

Chapter 3

LEAH. THE SAME MORNING.



Leah was impatient as she waited for Rebecca to climb in and settle on the bench across from her. She gazed out the window at the swirling snow, her stomach doing a similar swirl somewhere between doubt and dread within her. She did not wish to give up her weekend with Amelia without even trying to make the trip. If she failed, then so be it. But at least she could live with the knowledge that she had done all in her power to avoid Owen. If she simply sat at home, then she would be plagued with regret at not having even tried.

The carriage finally lurched into motion, and Leah gave Rebecca a reassuring smile. Perhaps she was being silly and the trip would be easy. It was not so great a distance. Usually, the trip only took her ten minutes or so, but with the conditions she was sure it would be at least a half hour before they made it. And possibly more.

The carriage crept along as the wind blew snow up against the windows. Even the hot bricks at their feet did little to warm them. They had blankets tucked tightly about their legs, but it did nothing to hide the nervous bouncing of Rebecca's feet. Usually, the thought of having snow at Christmas would have been a joy. Rarely were they awarded with such a beautiful white landscape, and if Leah did in fact make it to Amelia's, she would likely enjoy the sight. But not until she was safely at her destination.

After only five minutes of riding, their carriage jerked to a halt.

Leah looked over to her maid, whose lips were pinched so tightly that they were white. Rebecca's brow creased with angry scowl lines at the bridge of her nose.

"I'm sure Mr. Ashley will get us moving shortly," Leah tried to reassure her. "The snow is not so very deep after all."

Rebecca swallowed and shook her head. "Then why has the carriage stopped?"

Just after Rebecca finished her question, the door opened, revealing a startlingly snow-covered Mr. Ashley. "I am afraid we have hit a snow drift, miss. I will do my best to dig us out."

Leah threw her head back with a frustrated sigh, shutting her eyes tight. What a stupid idea this had been. Now they would all have to trudge back through the snow and wind.

"I'm very sorry, Mr. Ashley," Leah finally said, opening her eyes. "I had not thought the snow was very deep."

The middle-aged man leaned back, looking toward the carriage wheel that was stuck. "It isn't very deep, but the wind has caused some very large drifts in the road. I will do my best to dig us out." He nodded, then shut the door, blocking out most of the wind.

It howled outside, and Rebecca dipped her head, digging through her small reticule. Leah watched with a vague interest until Rebecca pulled out a small, furry object.

“What is that?” Leah leaned forward, squinting at what she could only describe in words as a thingamabob.

Rebecca tried to wrap her hand around it, dipping her head. “You will tease me.”

“I promise I will do no such thing.”

Rebecca sighed, refusing to meet Leah’s eyes as she loosened her grip enough to reveal a small rabbit’s foot. “It is a good luck charm.”

Leah swallowed a sudden bitter taste in the back of her throat. Just the sight of the foot made her want to gag. But she had promised not to tease Rebecca, and she would not go back on her word. “I see. Perhaps it will help us get out of our predicament.” Though there was not a chance of that.

The carriage gave a slight groan as the wind whipped through, causing Rebecca to clench her little furry foot tighter. She could do as she wanted, but a disgusting rabbit’s foot would do them no good. And neither would sitting here.

Leah scooted to the edge of her seat, putting her hand to the door.

“Where are you going?” Rebecca asked, eyes wide.

“I thought to ask if Mr. Ashley needed any assistance. I got us into this mess, so it only seems right that I should try to help get us out of it.”

“What if you catch a chill?”

“The carriage is not much warmer, Rebecca. I’m sure I will be fine.”

Rebecca put her rabbit’s foot on the bench, then made to follow. “I am coming with you. Perhaps with the three of us, we can get the wheel free.”

Leah nodded, pushing the door open with her shoulder. The wind was

pressing against it, making the task surprisingly difficult. She shoved harder, finally getting it open, only to have the wind pull it from her hand. The door cracked back against the side of the carriage, causing Leah to shriek in alarm. To her relief, Mr. Ashley was up far enough that the door just missed him.

He waved her off, keeping his scowl on the wheel buried in the drift. "I'm fine. But I'm afraid that even if I dig this wheel out, we will just get stuck in a few more feet."

Leah looked ahead at the road, barely able to make it out. There were snow drifts as far as the eye could see. In some places she could see the bare ground, while in others, the mounds looked deep enough that she was sure they would engulf her past her knees.

She hunched her back, pulling her cloak tighter. "Should we start walking back?"

Mr. Ashley stared at the wheel a moment longer. "I will get the horses unhitched and we can walk them back. No use trying to get the carriage unstuck now. We need to get you out of this wind."

Except it was her fault they were in this predicament in the first place.

Leah noticed a black spot a ways down the road, which she watched briefly before turning her attention back to Mr. Ashley.

The coachman stood, still eyeing the wheel. "You ladies get inside the carriage and I will work on unhitching the horses."

"Come on, Miss. No sense in standing here and freezing." Rebecca pulled Leah's arm toward the carriage, and Leah obligingly followed, stealing one more glance at the dark spot off in the distance. She wasn't sure if she was imagining it or not, but it seemed to be getting larger.

Once inside, both women pulled blankets over their laps to try and stay warm while they waited. Leah was now forced to consider what the change in

events meant. She would have to go back home and see Owen—at least until the following day when the roads will hopefully have melted. Then she would promptly escape to Amelia’s. Perhaps she could even hole up in her room and read, claiming a headache. Then she could say a night’s sleep cured her and whisk herself off to her friend’s.

Yes. There was still hope.

Then another thought occurred, causing her hopes to rise further. If she could not pass the roads today, then Owen likely would not be able to either.

“What?” Rebecca asked suddenly, breaking the silence.

Leah looked at her askance. “What do you mean?”

“You are smiling, which I find a bit odd, seeing as we are stuck in a blizzard.”

Leah forced her mouth not to smile at the thought of Owen being stuck in the town’s inn for the night. “I would hardly say it’s a blizzard.”

Rebecca picked up the rabbit’s foot again, using her thumb to stroke the fur. “Well it isn’t good, that’s for certain.”

“We have hardly gone a distance. Once we have the horses unhinged, we will be able to make our way back. All will be well.”

The two of them sat in silence, listening to the wind whistle through the minute gaps in the carriage, feeling the ever-so-slight sway as gusts pushed against it. And that’s when she heard it.

A voice.

Leah shot up in her seat, leaning to look out the window. “Rebecca, did you hear that?”

“The wind? Yes. How could I not?”

“No.” Leah pressed her nose against the window, placing her fingertips on the icy cool of the glass. “I heard someone outside.”

“Who would be out in this weather? Other than us, of course.” Rebecca gave her a sideways glance, but Leah let the moment pass. She *was* to blame for this after all.

Leah used her muff to wipe away condensation on the window, trying to peer out and see the stranger whose voice she had heard. She couldn’t make out much through the foggy glass and swirling snow, other than a black cloak. It was a man—that much was sure. But he had his arm raised to keep the wind off his face, thus obscuring any other details.

Leah withheld a sigh. She needed to show patience since this was her own doing. “You may rest assured that we will be safely inside Stonehill within fifteen minutes.” *Assuming they left immediately.* Leah kept a close eye on the black figure outside as he straightened. She narrowed her eyes as his cloak fell, revealing his face.

No. Please no. It couldn’t be. He was supposed to be trapped at the inn! She hunkered down into her seat, hoping he wouldn’t see her.

“Miss,” Rebecca scolded. “Whatever are you doing?”

Lowering herself until her back was almost flat against the seat bench, Leah finally resorted to using her muff to cover her face. “I do not wish for that gentleman outside to see me.”

“Huh!” Rebecca gasped. “Why? Do you think he is a highwayman?”

“No,” Leah hissed. She grimaced at the awkward angle of her spine as she tried to hold herself still. “As I said, he is someone I do not wish to see. Is he gone yet?”

Rebecca shook her head. “No. He seems to be helping Mr. Ashley with the wheel.”

“Confound it!”

“Is the man unsafe? Should we be worried?”

Leah sighed, then wiggled her nose, trying to hold in a sneeze as her muff tickled her face. “The worst he will do is trip us on our way out of the carriage. Unless that frightens you, you have nothing to fear.” Leah moved her muff so she could at least see the interior of the carriage.

Rebecca tilted her chin, leaning to get a better look. “He seems quite young. And if my eyes are not mistaken, quite attractive.”

Leah puffed out a breath. “Posh. He is an insolent young man. Nothing can convince me otherwise.”

“Oh dear. He must have done something quite dreadful.”

Yes. Leah believed having one's childhood smeared with pranks really was quite dreadful.

Rebecca's eyes widened and she leaned closer to the glass. “I think he is leaving.”

“Oh?” Leah almost sat up in her seat, but thought better of it. Rebecca might be wrong.

Rebecca gave a quick nod. “He is standing and moving.”

“Thank goodness.” Her spine might be forever bent at a horrid angle after this encounter. Bracing her palm against the bench, she began to sit up when Rebecca gasped.

“Oh, no. I seem to have been mistaken.”

“What?” But before Leah could ask any more, the door opened, and a smug Owen stood there staring at her. Smiling.

Chapter 4

OWEN. THE SAME MORNING.



Owen couldn't help the smile that lit his face as he stared at Leah Thompson all hunched down in her seat. Only she would attempt to have a carriage dragged through this weather. And judging from her posture, she had been trying to avoid being seen by him.

"Leah Thompson." Owen didn't bow. He only held the door open, letting the wind whip into the carriage where Leah and her maid each gave him a disgusted look.

"Owen." She narrowed an eye as she sat up straight. "Though I suppose I am to call you Mr. Turner now."

Mr. Turner? Yes, they were older and hadn't seen each other in several years, but the use of formal names hardly seemed necessary. "Nonsense. Now, if you would like, you can join me on my mount to get back home. I do not believe you are going to make it to your destination in this weather."

“No, thank you. I shall walk with Mr. Ashley when he has finished unhitching the horses.”

“Then you must allow me to walk along with you.”

She pulled her fingers to her lips before quickly placing them back in her lap, turning innocent eyes to him and blinking abnormally fast. “How shall I ever thank you for such kindness.”

He tried not to grin, but felt the corner of his lip quirk up. “I am sure I can find something, but do not worry yourself over it now. The details can wait.”

Leah’s mouth dropped open and her eyes went wide, but Owen shut the door before she could say anything else.

“Let us get to work unhitching these poor creatures, shall we?” Owen crouched beside the rigging, using numb fingers to try and assist Mr. Ashley in his task. “If only they had saddles, then Miss Thompson could ride one back. Or she could stop being so single-minded and ride *my* horse back.”

Mr. Ashley shook his head, apparently accustomed to his mistress's stubbornness and already bracing himself for it.

When they finished, Owen sauntered over to the carriage, lightly knocking on it. He perched his hands on his hips and planted a large smile on his face as he waited for the door to open.

The door cracked and Leah peered out at him. “What?”

“You and your maid may ride my horse back to Stonehill and Mr. Ashley and I shall walk the other horses back on foot.”

She narrowed her eyes slightly, pursing her lips. “Nonsense. I do not need you to rescue me. Nor do I wish to be pushed off the saddle and into the snow. You may take Rebecca with you.”

Leah’s maid did not miss a beat. “I am not riding that horrid creature.”

“What?” Leah turned to the young woman. “What do you mean? Do you

not ride?”

The maid tightened her arms across her waist. “No. They are skittish, flea ridden, and have a shifty look to their eyes.”

“A shifty look?” Leah asked incredulously.

“Yes. I never did trust a horse.”

Leah rolled her eyes before looking back to Owen. “Very well. Rebecca and I shall *both* walk.”

Owen laughed before leveling a scolding glance at her. “Come now. You cannot be serious. You would rather walk in this weather than ride? How will I ever face your brother?” He idly kicked a mound of snow as another thought occurred to him. “Or your parents for that matter.”

“I’m sure they will expect nothing less.”

“Excuse me?” he said with a laugh. “How could I call myself a gentleman if I were to do such a thing?”

“The term is used rather loosely in my opinion.”

Owen’s chest burned and he narrowed his eyes. Did she mean to insult him due to the way his family rose in rank? Being merchants first, then purchasing an estate with their own hard-earned funds? In his mind, it was more difficult to do and thus should demand more respect. But that was not the case in society.

He gathered his wits and patience, reluctantly holding his hand out to her. “My family may be merchants, but we are still gentlemen.”

“No, that was not what I meant—”

“Leah, just come back with me. It is freezing out here.”

Mr. Ashley turned to Owen, shock coloring his cheeks, but Owen pressed on. He had known Leah most of their lives. It was natural for him to use her Christian name. Though, after her jab he was not sure she deserved to ride his

nically saddled horse. “You and your maid can ride together. How can that possibly be disagreeable to you?” He was sure she of all people could find a reason.

She narrowed her eyes, watching him as he stood in the blustery wind.

“Fine,” she finally conceded. She stood, coming to the door where Owen still held out his hand. She glared at it, but after glancing at the icy step that led out to her freedom, she reluctantly took it. “Do not let go and make me fall.”

Owen tilted his head to the side with a roll of his eyes. “Leah, I would never do such a thing.”

“Of course not. Because you are a gentleman, correct?”

What was going on? Leah had always been stubborn and headstrong, but usually he felt their teasing was much lighter. Now her remarks were cutting, and Owen was quite sure that if looks could actually kill, he would be dead where he stood. Perhaps she was more disappointed in her failed travels than he had realized. “Yes, I am,” he bit out. “Now, let us get you and your maid saddled before we all freeze.”

Her maid moved to step out of the carriage and Mr. Ashley helped her down. “I told you, I will not ride that thing.”

“It is the quickest way home, Rebecca,” Leah said, hunching her back. “And I say we take the meager offering from Mr. Turner before he changes his mind.”

“Meager?” Owen bit down to keep his teeth from chattering. It really was blasted cold. “Would you have me carry you back? I daresay my horse will be much faster.”

Her nostrils flared and she took slow, measured breaths. Finally, she blew out a lungful of air, creating a fog of frustration about her mouth. “Just help

us get saddled please.”

“I would be happy to.” He walked over to his mount, readying to assist the ladies up. Leah went first, struggling to get up due to the constriction of her skirts. Finally, she settled herself, but sitting astride caused her hem to rise nearly to her knee.

Owen’s eyes briefly froze on her stocking-clad calf, but he forced himself to shut his eyes against the sight. The cold air seemed to dissipate for a moment as heat rose up his neck and all the way up to the top of his head. He cautiously opened his eyes a moment later and Leah had pulled her cloak forward, successfully concealing her lower leg. He opened his mouth, but no words came out.

“Miss,” Rebecca gasped. “You are riding astride.” Luckily, the young maid did not suffer from muteness as Owen seemed to.

“There really isn’t any other way.” Owen cleared his throat and held his hand out to her. “It is not a side saddle.”

The maid looked at his horse as if it would kick or bite her without warning, so Owen reached a hand out, petting the mare’s head. He couldn’t truly attest to the creature's temperament as he had just rented it in town. But from what he could tell, it was a gentle horse.

The maid gave it one last leery glance before accepting Owen’s hand, trying to raise herself up in the stirrup whilst attempting to swing her leg across the horse’s back. Her foot got tangled in her skirts and she kicked and cursed as she fought to right herself.

“Here.” Owen reached up, doing his best to assist, but her flailing made him fear injury. “Please, stop kicking.”

She squeaked, her foot thoroughly tangled in her dress as she fell off the horse and into a pile of snow. She used fisted hands to beat the snow. “See!

Horrid creatures!”

Owen looked up to Leah, who was attempting not to laugh as she watched her maid, while simultaneously trying to find shelter behind the mare’s neck. “I hardly say it is the horse’s fault. She has been a saint to sit here so still in this wind.”

“I am not getting back on that thing.” The maid shook her head, pushing herself up out of the snow. “I will walk.”

“Fine,” Owen bit out. His patience was done and he wanted to get inside *now*. “I will ride back with Miss Thompson and you may walk back with the horses and Mr. Ashley.” He stomped through the snow, grabbing the horses’ reins and swinging himself up behind Leah who practically recoiled as he mounted.

“What are you doing?” she shrieked.

He snapped the reins, setting the horse off. “I am getting us out of this horrid weather and back to Stonehill where it is warm and dry, and likely has a steaming pot of tea waiting for us.”

“They are not expecting me. They think I shall be at Amelia’s house.”

“I’m sure they expect you.”

She turned her head just enough that he could see her profile—her determined brow and the stubborn set to her mouth. She was just as beautiful as ever. And just as aggravating. “What does that mean?”

He shrugged, but she didn’t see it, having already turned her head forward, so he leaned close to her ear. “That they indulged your stubbornness and allowed you to attempt to get to your friend’s house, knowing full well that you would not make it and would be back home shortly.”

“I have an idea.” She feigned excitement, smiling brightly before it vanished just as swiftly as it came. “Why don’t we ride back in silence?”

Bitterness bubbled up inside of him. “Yes. I would hate for you to have to converse with a humble merchant.”

She turned her head just enough for him to make out her furrowed brow. “Excuse me?”

“I said,” he began, raising his voice, “I would hate for you to have to converse with a mere merchant.”

She winced, then rolled her eyes. “Yes, I heard you. I just cannot believe that you said it.”

“Me? You are the one who said it.”

“That is not what I meant by my remark.”

“Then what did you mean?”

She shook her head. “That you do not deserve the title of gentleman because of your . . .” She quickly looked him up and down. “Peculiar personality.”

“Peculiar?” His mood melted slightly. He had apparently taken her remark incorrectly, which dispelled a bit of the tension on his end.

“Yes. I fear I cannot come up with a better word in such a short time.”

“I believe you mean to say, dynamic and interesting.”

She chuckled and shook her head before turning ahead. “No. Those are definitely not the words I would choose.”

They continued on in a more peaceful silence, and it only took a minute or two before Owen soon saw Stonehill come into view over a slight curve of the drive.

“There it is,” he said with a smile.

Owen had always loved coming to Stonehill. He loved his mother and father dearly, but they had never had other children besides himself. Whenever he had visited the Thompsons he had always indulged in their

antics wholeheartedly. The entire lot was a spectacle and he was often found in the middle of one of their shenanigans. But it had been years since he had seen them all, and he really *was* looking forward to spending Christmas with them. Hence his venturing through a snowstorm to get there and being willing to go a day without his trunks until the inn could safely have them sent.

Another thought occurred to him. “Are all of your siblings at home?”

Leah lifted her shoulders higher about her neck. “Yes. I was the only one that was to be gone, but it appears that will not be happening.”

“All the better. I would have missed you.” He didn’t hold back the grin that spread across his face. Of all the Thompson children, he and Leah had always been the most at odds. But he had always found great enjoyment in heckling her.

Leah didn’t respond, not a chuckle or word—just the same hunched figure as she tried to get warm. Leah eventually began to adjust herself in the saddle, and Owen instinctively wrapped a hand about her waist to keep her from falling. His hand stiffened once he realized what he had done, but to remove his hand now would only be more awkward than leaving it where it was—which happened to be gently cradling Leah’s waist.

She stiffened slightly under his touch and he suddenly feared for the safety of his hand. What could he do to distract her? *And* himself. And why did her waist feel so appealing under his touch? Why had instinct caused him to act so protectively? She likely would have been fine, but he had acted without much thought. He decided moving the subject along would be the best way to distract her. “How are all your siblings?” He had to almost yell to be heard over the wind.

Leah remained quiet for a moment before shrugging and clearing her throat.

“The same, I suppose. Jonas needs a haircut, Rose was mad at Miranda for losing her watercolors, Cecily was lamenting not being able to join me, and Graham has not been seen all day.”

“Likely reading in some corner.”

Leah’s cheek moved as she smiled ahead of him. “Precisely.”

Then, to his great surprise, Leah leaned back until she was settled against his chest.

He swallowed. “Well, it sounds like things are just the same as ever. Splendid.”

“And how about you?”

“Me?”

“Yes. Are you the same as ever?”

Owen looked out at the rolling, snowy landscape as he gave her question some thought. He was the same in a lot of ways—perhaps the most important ways—but he was not a young boy anymore. He had responsibilities and duties to perform and his schedule was much more tight. “I would say yes, other than only having five days before I must return to work.”

Leah kept her face forward, only giving a nod as her response.

The rest of the ride, which was not long at all, was spent in a more companionable silence as they tried to remain warm. And when they finally made it to Stonehill, Mrs. Thompson stood at the front window, smiling expectantly at their return.

Chapter 5

OWEN. EVENING OF THE FIRST DAY.



Owen sat across from Leah after dinner, with all of the Thompson family gathered around the fire. The gentlemen each had a drink in their hands, and Owen swirled his in front of his face.

“It’s a good bottle, isn’t it?” Jonas asked him.

Owen nodded. “It is. But I was more admiring the glass itself than the contents. It’s a good cut.”

“It should be,” Jonas said with a chuckle. “It’s your glass.”

“Ah, that explains it then.” He smirked over at Jonas, taking a sip of the amber liquid.

Little Rose knelt down by the fire, holding out an iron and toasting herself an after-dinner treat. “Mother won’t let me use those glasses,” she complained, holding her pie plate in the flame as she crouched. “She says they are only for Papa and Jonas.”

“Well, perhaps I shall have to provide you with your own set, hm?”

She smiled, her face lighting up. “Truly? I would love that more than anything!”

“More than anything?” Leah scoffed, shaking her head. “Surely Mama would have bought you a set of glasses if you really wanted them. Have you ever thought to ask? Or are you only trying to appease Mr. Turner?”

“Leah,” Mrs. Thompson said, her tone low and warning. “Leave your sister be.”

“Yes, Leah,” Miranda interjected. “Are your stays too tight? You seem in a rather foul mood this evening.”

Leah’s face turned red in an instant as she cast a glare at her sister. “We have a guest, Miranda. Please try and keep such personal revelations to yourself.”

Cecily rolled her eyes, slouching back into her seat. “Oh, come now. It is only Owen. I hardly say he counts.”

“Only Owen?” He spoke up on his own behalf, his words coming out on a laugh. How good it felt to be included in their sibling bickering. It just went to assure himself that he was really and truly loved by them. For who else would be so blatant and rash other than family?

Cecily shrugged, giving him a triumphant smile with no remorse crossing her face.

He laughed, turning from Cecily to Leah. Her fingers were against her lips as she looked across the room, and she didn’t seem to notice him watching her. Owen followed her gaze over to Rose, who slowly turned her pie iron as she wore a downcast expression. Owen flicked his gaze back to Leah, half expecting her to start chewing her fingernails, as had always been her preferred habit before, but instead she only drummed her fingers across her lips. She stood from her seat, going over to her youngest sister, putting her

arm about her, and speaking to her in hushed tones. Whatever she said was enough to lift Rose's spirits and bring the smile back to Rose's face.

Owen watched with some interest as it unfolded. Leah had always been determined and single-minded, and as children it had bothered him to the high heavens. But the way she was quick to retract her words and comfort Rose made him wonder if perhaps she had matured some over the years.

Leah stood from her place at the fire, running her hands along the bodice of her gown and Owen was struck by the way the fire played across her face and figure. Could she really be so different after only four years? He had always known she was beautiful, but never had he had an attraction to her. And he was slightly horrified by the way he couldn't remove his gaze from her.

"I'm sorry if my dress is not up to snuff compared to the fashions of London, but perhaps you could hide your obvious distaste a bit better than that."

His eyes shot up to hers and she narrowed her gaze. If only Leah knew what his true thoughts were, she might still be angry, but for a much different reason.

"Leah." Jonas sat with an elbow on the arm of his chair as he shook his head. "You are being unfathomably ridiculous."

She took a deep breath, gazing at the carpet in what seemed like an effort to collect herself. "I suppose I am. My apologies."

Quick to apologize? That was new. And the conversation moved forward without Owen needing to explain his staring, so he could consider it a win on all counts.

She sighed. "In light of such things, perhaps I shall try and get some rest. It's been a day full of disappointments and it seems to be wearing on me."

"Of course, dear," Mrs. Thompson said with a smile. "Some rest might be

just what you need.”

Leah clasped her hands, dipping her head. “Good night.”

When Owen was sure she was gone from the room and out of earshot, he leaned toward his friend. “What was all that about?”

Jonas picked up his glass, pausing just as he was about to take a drink. “Goodness if I know.” He shook his head, then drained the glass of its contents.

“Please excuse her, Owen,” Mrs. Thompson said. “She was very much looking forward to spending the weekend with a friend of hers.”

“Of course. I understand.” Owen leaned back in his seat, placing his foot across his knee. He was still a bit unsettled by the way he had noticed her only moments ago. Then he remembered earlier that day when he saw half her leg as she mounted the horse, and then when he wrapped his arm around her waist during their ride. He shook his head, trying to rid the memories from his mind for all of eternity.

“Not to mention she was loath to see you,” Jonas said, chuckling to himself.

“Loath seems to be a strong word. Surely she does not harbor that much anger toward me.” He took a swig of his drink, puckering his lips. He quickly looked back to Jonas. “Does she?”

“She was rather adamant about leaving this weekend. And over Christmas of all things.”

Owen tilted his glass, watching the light of the fire refract into shards as it hit all the tiny cuts and angles. “I cannot believe it has been four years. How did that happen?”

Jonas leaned back into his seat. “You had school.” He shrugged.

“Yes. And I continued to work when I *wasn't* at school.” He dropped his hand and glass to his lap. “But how did time slip by me like that?”

“A man has to grow up at some point and begin a life of his own.”

Yes, he does. And Owen felt even more pressure than a typical gentleman’s son. He and his father came from a line of men who had started from the ground up. While some families were hesitant to form relationships with new money, as they called it, the Thompsons had been most welcoming.

And, unbeknownst to anyone there, Owen was going to be coming back to Carterton more permanently. And in the not-too-distant future.

Chapter 6

LEAH. MORNING OF THE SECOND DAY.



Leah leapt from her bed as soon as her eyes opened, running over to the window in hopes that the sun was out and the snow was melting. She placed her hands against the cool windowpane, her heart sinking as she watched more snow gently fall onto the heaps they already had. Perhaps it was best to let go of any plans of escape and accept her fate.

She would be staying here all weekend.

With Owen.

Leah leaned her head against the glass, pressing her eyes shut. There was a possibility she was being ridiculous. She and Owen were both grown now. Surely he wasn't planning to pull any pranks during his stay. If Leah set her mind to it, she could ignore his presence and continue on with the Christmas festivities with her family. Yes. She was almost positive she could tolerate being near him without any more spiteful words. All she had to do was ignore him completely.

Her stomach grumbled, forcing her to leave the comfort and safety of her room for some breakfast. She held her fingers to the stair banister, letting them trail over the smooth wood grain as she reluctantly, and very slowly, made her way to the dining room. She could do this. She could tolerate Owen. She. Could. Do. This.

Perhaps if she said it enough times she would come to believe it.

Walking into the dining room, she glanced about at the seating arrangement. Her mother and father sat at opposite ends of the table, with the boys gathered near her father's end and the girls gathered near her mother. Leaving, of course, two empty chairs in the middle that bordered each grouping. And, to make matters even more enjoyable, Owen sat on the outer edge of the gentlemen's side.

She took the seat beside Rose, one chair over and opposite of Owen. This was as far as she could possibly get from him.

Rose didn't waste a moment of time, spinning toward Leah as soon as she found her seat. "Oh, Leah. Please convince Cecily that we must go outside today. It would be such fun! But of course, she is determined to be a wet blanket as usual." She looked over at Cecily, discreetly sticking her tongue out at her.

A servant came over, pouring a hot cup of tea for Leah. She raised it to her lips, inhaling the warm steam before taking a long sip. "Will no one else agree to go with you?"

Rose leaned back in her seat, crossing her arms over her chest with her lips protruding in a pout. "No. Graham is no fun at all and Jonas says he is too old for such games. Miranda simply said no and Cecily said she would go but only if you agree." She sat up, gripping Leah's arm. "So you must go! I cannot go sledding all by myself. It wouldn't be nearly as fun."

“I will go,” Owen said, worming his way into their sisterly conversation.

“You will?” Roses’ eyes beamed with hope and admiration as she looked over to their guest. Did she perhaps have a small crush forming? Leah wouldn’t be surprised. Owen had always been kind to her, going out of his way to indulge her whims. He had a much different relationship with Rose than he did with herself. Rose had been only a very young child last time Owen came to visit them. But now that she was nearly ten years of age, she liked to think herself grown into a young lady.

“See, you do not need me. Mr. Turner has agreed to go.” Leah took another sip of tea before gently placing it back on the table.

“You *must* go. If you don’t, then Cecily won’t.”

Leah ran her finger along the handle of her cup. “How many people do you need to go tobogganing?”

Rose straightened in her seat, apparently remembering she wished to change her overall appearance from a young girl to a more refined lady. Raising her chin, she delicately forked a small bit of egg. “It would be more fun with as many people as possible. Then we can race.”

Leah moved some food about her plate with her fork, letting her eyes flit to Owen. He was smiling smugly at her. “Oh come, Leah. Please? It’s for Rose.”

She narrowed her gaze. She had promised herself that she would try and get along with the man. Being petty was not a good quality and she was determined to move past it. “Fine.” She placed her fork down, sighing. “I will go. But you must allow me to enjoy my breakfast before rushing us all out the door.”

Rose stood from her seat, her chair screeching as it was shoved backwards from her abrupt stance. “Of course! I shall go and get ready at once.”

“Rose!” But it was too late. She was already running from the room to get changed.

Owen shook his head, his elbow on the edge of the table, his fork hanging limply from his hand over his plate as he smiled after Rose and her elated departure. “She likes to pretend she is a young lady, but she cannot fool me. She is the same little girl inside that she has always been.”

Leah studied him as he continued to gaze at the doorway, smiling. “What?” Her question was tentative and quiet.

He shook his head, finally looking back to his plate. “Oh, nothing. I just cannot believe how grown she is now.”

Her posture softened and she gave a shrug. “Yes. I suppose it has been some time since you’ve seen her.”

Cecily suddenly groaned from her seat by their mother. “This means I must go outside now. I had been hoping you would say no.”

Leah shook her head. “How could I? Did you see how excited she was?” Her food was growing cold, so she cut her ham up and took a small piece.

“Does this mean I must go as well?” Jonas leaned forward.

Owen shook his head. “Of course. What has happened to the lot of you? Usually, you would all jump at the chance for a toboggan race.”

“We are not little children anymore,” Jonas said, chuckling.

Owen gave an overdramatic sigh, pushing himself back from the table. “I must admit I am disappointed. I had envisioned a Christmas full of Thompson antics.”

Jonas’ smile widened and his laugh boomed in the room. “Well, perhaps that can be arranged. I will go. Miranda? Any chance we can convince you to join us?”

Miranda rolled her eyes, but seemed to mull over the idea, rubbing her chin

as she thought. “Fine. I will do it. But only if Graham gets off his high horse for once and goes as well.”

“Tobogganing?” Graham shook his head. “That is asking for a broken leg.”

“A broken leg?” Owen furrowed his brow as his mouth smiled in amused confusion. “How intense do you think it will be?”

Graham leveled a serious stare. “Have you gone with this family before? It can be vicious.”

“Perfect!” Owen slapped his hand on the table, smiling broadly. “That is just what I was hoping for.”

“I think this is a splendid idea,” their mother said from her seat at the end of the table. “I shall have Mrs. Bowles make up some chocolate for when you are done. Then we can perhaps sing by the piano later?”

“Oh, and we could put on a play!” Cecily brightened at the prospect, looking about the table to gain confirmation from the rest of them.

“Yes to all of it,” Owen said.

Leah had to admit that Owen’s desire for things to be like they were all those years ago was making the weekend seem more appealing. It had been a while since they all put on a play together. She had always loved it, but the last two years they had slowly found excuses not to. She hadn’t even thought about it until now.

“Perhaps you could figure out the play, Leah?”

Leah glanced up at Owen, taking a slow breath as she studied him. He had remembered. The Christmas play had always been Leah’s favorite thing to do with the family, and Owen’s question proved he had not forgotten it. “Yes, of course. I would be happy to.”

They all stood from the table, dispersing to get ready to go outside. So far, Owen had behaved himself. Perhaps she had been worrying and stewing over

nothing. But, the day had only just begun.

Chapter 7

LEAH. AFTERNOON OF THE SECOND DAY.



Leah's boots skimmed the fluffy snow that now covered the more dense and heavy layer beneath. A genuine smile crept over her lips for the first time since Owen's arrival. The clouds had dispersed, allowing the sun to illuminate the ice crystals and dance across the expanse of white. There was a fair walk to get to the hill and Rose had managed to convince Owen to pull her on the toboggan. She sat atop it, high and regal as a queen might grace her royal throne.

Leah huffed a quick breath from the corner of her mouth, successfully blowing away a curl that had fallen over her face. She pushed back the fur-lined hood from her brow, allowing a bit of the warmth from the sun to kiss her cheeks when a sudden squeal rang out as Owen dashed ahead with Rose on the toboggan. Leah had to swallow back a strange sensation that filled her chest as she watched him bring joy and delight to her sister's face. Rose held her hand to her head to keep her hood in place, holding on to the toboggan

with the other as she laughed in delight. He effortlessly pulled her along, his smile bright and genuine as he doted on her. It was . . . endearing. Leah was surprised to find she couldn't look away.

“Any chance I could convince you to pull me along?” Graham asked, trudging up beside her with a toboggan of his own trailing along after him.

She shook her head with a grin. “Aren't you a bit old for that sort of thing?”

“Yes, but so is Rose. I'm only trying to even things up.”

Leah threw her hand back, lightly smacking Graham in the chest. “Rose is still much smaller than you.”

Graham puffed out his chest, putting a hand to the front of his jacket and raising his chin. “That is true. I am practically a man now, after all.”

“Yes, of course.” Leah pulled in her lips, trying not to smile. Graham was as skinny as a boy of sixteen could be and had only managed to sprout approximately five sparse hairs on his chin.

When they made it to the place where the hill sloped down to a small valley, Leah sat on her toboggan, catching her breath. It crystalized in the air and she watched it swirl before dissipating into nothing. She had been afraid of getting chilled out here, but after that walk, she had the opposite problem. Pulling the hood entirely off her head, she felt a breeze run down her neck, cooling her in a moment.

Rose saw the crest of the hill and jumped off of her conveyance, running with all her might and sending little white clouds up into the air after her heels. “I get to go first!”

“You are only able to run like that because you didn't have to lift a finger to get here,” Leah yelled after her. She smiled and shook her head, taking a deep breath. The cool air burned her lungs and she let out a small cough.

“If you had only asked, I would have pulled you as well.” Owen's shadow

fell across the snow beside her, causing her to glance up at him. A smug smile hung on his lips as he looked after Rose. Leah turned back and saw her youngest sister take a few running steps before jumping onto her toboggan and disappearing over the hill.

Leah spared Owen a quick glance. “Nonsense. You would have dumped me into the snow at the first opportunity.”

He shook his head, chuckling. “Not as long as you didn’t whine at me about how slow I was going.”

“Whine at you?” She held a hand to her brow, blocking the sun as she looked up at him.

The corners of his mouth turned down as he gave a decisive nod. “Yes. Whine.”

“Since when do I whine?”

“Since when *don’t* you whine.”

“Perhaps I wouldn’t whine if you and Jonas didn’t always torment me.” She stood, brushing snow off the bottom of her skirts to release some of her agitation. The nerve. For Owen to happily pull Rose all the way to this hill like she was the queen herself and then to come over and pester *her*, only to then claim she whines. “Did you only come over here to bother me?”

He looked out toward the hill where Leah’s siblings discussed who would pair with whom on the next run. “To be fair, I did not incite the disagreement. You did.”

Leah rolled her eyes. While he was technically correct, she did not wish to give him the satisfaction of agreeing with him. She gathered her own toboggan, ignoring the fact that she was still a bit out of breath from her walk. If she needed to plunge to the bottom of the hill to get away from the aggravation Owen was causing her, then that’s exactly what she would do.

“Who wishes to race me?” Leah asked, turning to Miranda, Cecily and Jonas, who all stood together.

“Why don’t we all go at once?” Jonas asked, glancing about at his sisters.

Miranda shrugged. “I suppose that would be fine.”

Cecily threw her head back. “I would love to. And I plan to beat Miranda by a mile if only to punish her for such moodiness.”

“Come now.” Leah lined up her toboggan in the row they had all begun to form. “Let us be nice and have fun.”

Rose huffed up the edge of the hill, smiling wide. “I want to race too.” She swung her arms out as she ran, her steps awkward and clumsy while her boots burrowed down into the snow. She arranged her toboggan by Jonas.

“What shall the winner receive as their award?” Jonas asked, readying himself.

Owen sidled up beside Leah, tucking his scarf tighter around his neck. “Bragging rights.”

Apparently he was joining their little race. Ducky.

“Is that enough of an award?” Rose asked, her brow crinkled. “How about a sweet of some sort?”

Cecily laughed. “You have had enough sweets to last until the new year.”

“No worries, Rose,” Owen assured her. “I shall find you something in the kitchen even if I have to endure the wrath of Mrs. Bowles. I am not afraid of her.”

“No?” Leah laughed despite herself. “I certainly fear her.”

“She is all bark and no bite.” Owen laid out on his stomach, staring down the hill. “So, are we doing this?”

“Yes,” Cecily piped up. “On the count of three. One, two . . .” She glanced down the row at everyone, pausing dramatically. “Three!”

They all pushed themselves forward, Owen taking a quick lead. Leah leaned her weight forward, feeling the rush as her toboggan sped ahead. The wind caught her hair, and her stomach lifted as the hill's incline steepened. A laugh bubbled out of her and she took a deep breath, filling her lungs with the crisp air. The siblings were gaining speed at varying degrees, Rose quickly falling behind. It was a tad unfair as she weighed much less than the rest of them. Owen's lead waned as Jonas shot ahead, with Miranda just behind him. Her pretense at grumpiness had quickly faded and she laughed as she brought her sled up beside their brother.

Leah scrunched lower, trying to gain speed. She took a quick glance to her right to see if Owen had managed to get ahead of her again, but when she expected to find him staring down to their destination, she found him watching her—but only for a moment. As soon as her eyes met his, he quickly moved his gaze down the hill. She did the same, but had lost her place as Miranda sped ahead.

The end of the hill neared and just as Leah thought she might manage to place second, something looming in the corner of her vision neared, making her gaze jerk toward it.

“Owen!” she yelled. But it was too late. Just after she yelled his name, the front of his toboggan slid in front of hers. Their toboggans collided, throwing Leah from her seat and right into Owen. She felt a jolt as their bodies crashed into one another, dislodging Owen from his sled and both of them landing in the freezing snow.

She used her feet and hands to shove him away, sitting up and wiping snow off her face. “What was that for?” Her chest heaved. Not only had it startled her to be thrown into him and consequently into the snow, but this was so

typically Owen. Anger burned within her. Why could he not just allow a race to simply be a race? Why add the silly antics?

Owen pushed himself upright, reaching back and pulling a clump of snow from within the neck of his jacket and throwing it to the side with a grimace. Turning toward her, his chilled frown melted into a scowl. “Excuse me? You think I did that on purpose?”

“How else did your toboggan happen to slide in front of mine just as we finished?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” he began, sarcasm dripping from his words. “How about I got off track and accidentally clipped your sled?”

She shook her head, unable to find her voice.

“I won,” Jonas said smugly from down the line of bodies. “Not much of a surprise though. I usually do.” He smiled wide, pulling his toboggan up on its end so it tucked neatly under the crook of his arm. “I suppose this means you must endure the wrath of Mrs. Bowles, Owen. I shall require an apple tart for my victory.”

Owen sighed, pulling his disbelieving glare from Leah and over to Jonas. “As you wish.”

“Shall we race again?” Miranda glanced about.

Cecily covered her mouth as she smiled. “Enjoyed it, did you?”

Miranda shrugged. “I must admit that I did.”

“I would have had Owen not crashed into me. Apparently if he can’t beat me, he must thwart me.” Leah turned on him in a flash.

“Got a flea in your cap, Leah?” Owen stood, shaking his head. “It was an accident.”

“Of course it was,” she spat. It sounded like a simple enough explanation, but nothing was simple with Owen. He was scheming, conniving, and loved

to convey innocence when he was nothing of the sort.

Leah stood, gathering the rope to her toboggan and turning to head up the hill. And then she felt it. The tell-tale thump of a snowball against her back. She twirled in an instant, her mouth gaping.

Owen leaned against the trunk of a tree, glancing up in the air with his arms crossed over his chest. He brought his eyes back to her, rearing back. “Oh dear, Leah. Your cheeks are rather flushed. Do you feel all right?”

And that’s when it was decided. For once in her life, she was going to give Owen Turner a taste of his own medicine.

Chapter 8

LEAH. EVENING OF THE SECOND DAY



Leah drummed her fingers along her toilette table, pondering just how she would extract years of revenge in one weekend. Once that slightly ice-crust-ed snowball had hit her back, she had known it was war. It was the straw that broke the camel's back, if you will. Now the question was, should she do it subtly? Perhaps gradually increase the pranks until Owen was driven away from the estate? She would not stomp off and tattle on him like she did as a young girl. This time, she would take matters into her own silk-gloved hands.

But what mischief could she cause him?

She hadn't realized how much creativity it took to think of such malicious schemes and was at a loss. But surely she was clever enough to think of something. If Owen was capable of it, then so was she.

Leah stood from her chair, fisting her hands as she paced the room. Perhaps ruminating on all of Owen's schemes over the years would ignite an idea of

her own.

There was the snail in the dollhouse, which she had already discussed with Jonas. There was also the time Owen had tripped her, causing her to fall into the mud directly in front of Peter Wright, splashing some of the thick brown paste onto his trousers. That had certainly been the most mortifying. Peter had been the young boy that all the girls had watched with a glow on their cheeks. While they had all been too young to be planning matrimony, she had certainly appreciated his sweet smiles and lovely black hair. But after witnessing her planting her face into the thick, cakey mud, she doubted Peter ever looked her way again. She had not handled it well. If she had been a lady about it, perhaps he would have forgotten the whole affair. But she had boiled over the top, stomping in the puddle like the child she was—only making the condition of poor Peter's trousers worse.

Owen had tried to hide his laugh, his face nearly popping from holding it in. But she knew the truth. He had found it most entertaining.

Flashes of other instances poured into her mind, playing one right after the other. Owen planting mistletoe in a doorway and tricking her into walking under it with George Fitzroy—the boy who always had a string of saliva that hung between his lips as he spoke. Owen giving her a different set of lyrics for the song they all sang at the Hodge's Christmas party, causing her to burst into a robust new chorus, only to be met with silence and stares from everyone else. Owen adding an unsightly weed to her bonnet whilst she wasn't looking before church service—causing her to sit through the entire sermon with the brown, spindly plant protruding high above the rest of her hat's adornments for the rest of the congregation to see. And last, but certainly not least, Owen belching at an extreme volume in a room full of

their peers, only to glare at her and exclaim that she was most rude to do so in front of guests.

Yes. Owen Turner needed to be put in his place. And Leah was more than happy to be the one to do it.

Leah readied for dinner, feeling a bit like an evil villain from the novels she occasionally read. While staring at her reflection in the mirror as Rebecca styled her hair, she even practiced her malicious grin. One certainly needed a wicked grin if they were to be a villain, and she would like to know it looked correct before displaying it for Owen to see.

“What are you doing, Miss?” Rebecca scowled as she used the hot iron to curl the hair about Leah’s face.

“Oh, nothing. I only wish to practice my smile for the play we shall be putting on this weekend.”

Rebecca cradled the curl in her hand for a moment, allowing it to cool slightly before letting the perfect ringlet fall against Leah’s cheek. “What role are you playing? Hopefully not the fair maiden, for that last smile sent a shiver down my spine.”

Perfect.

After flashing her practiced smile in the mirror one last time, Leah took measured steps towards the stairs. She put her foot on the first step, caressing the banister with delicate fingers and gazing about the foyer as if she were its ruler. The power she felt was most intriguing, and she found she quite enjoyed it.

“What is wrong with your face?”

Leah brought her haughty chin down, glaring at Jonas who leaned against the wall below. She shook her head, making her way to the bottom of the stairs. “What do you mean by that?”

His face contorted, his lips forming a confused grimace. “You look as if you smell something unseemly.”

“Smell something unseemly?” She stopped when she reached the last step, staring at him. He only raised a brow, waiting for her to reply. Perhaps her look of superiority needed to be perfected as well. This was why one needed to practice such things in front of a mirror!

She shook her head. “Never the matter. Where is Owen?”

Jonas’ gaze shifted, focusing over her shoulder.

Leah turned about and Owen stood there beaming at her. “You needed me?”

“No.” She scoffed. “I certainly do not *need* you.”

“A shame.” He tilted his head, grinning at her in the same mischievous way she had attempted to convey earlier. She hated that his malicious smile was better.

His hair was groomed to perfection for the evening, and she allowed herself a quick glance at his attire. She resented that he struck an attractive figure. Instead of being the gangly boy of their youth, he was broader, his facial features more masculine, and based upon his earlier display pulling Rose, stronger than he had once been.

“You are certainly staring at me as if you need something.”

She righted her gaze back to his face and his taunting grin. Her cheeks blazed. “I only thought you had some mud on your breeches. But alas, you are not the one to fall prey to puddles. That is more my lot in life, is it not?”

He let out a brief chuckle, revealing an alarmingly dashing smile. “It is freezing outside, Leah. I do not believe there is a puddle to be found in the entire county.”

“You are purposely dismissing the meaning of my remark.”

“Am I?” He walked over to her, offering his arm. What was he about? Earlier he had crashed into her and then pelted her with snow. Now he was offering to escort her to dinner?

It must be a trap.

She stared at his arm, hating that a part of her wanted to take it. “No, thank you.”

“Leah,” he said with a laugh, dropping his arm. “I am sorry about the snowball earlier. Is that what this is about?”

Yes. And the sled, the snail, the weed, the mistletoe, the puddle. It was about *all of it*.

Perhaps she was being too obvious. If she really wished to take him unawares, she needed to feign innocence. Snarkiness would only make it clear to him that she had ill intentions. “I’m sorry. You are correct and I am acting like a child. Thank you for the offer.” Leah held her hand out and he lifted his arm for her to take it. She slid her gloves over the sleeve of his deep green jacket, getting a slight flutter in her stomach as she did so. *Silly, silly girl!*

“Owen.” Rose’s soft whine came from behind them. “I had thought you would sit by me at dinner.”

Owen grinned, looking down at Leah and speaking softly. “It appears your whining has transferred to Rose.”

Leah shook her head. “Have you considered that it perhaps had more to do with my age and less to do with my personality?”

He didn’t answer her, only raised his brow and continued to grin at her in that maddening way. Why was he being so elusive? Did age make one more private in nature? She supposed it was true of herself. Things that she would

have shared with the world were now only shared with those she trusted most. Like Amelia.

Once the family gathered, they filed into the dining room, taking their places at the table. Owen held Leah's chair out for her and she reached back with her hand to be sure it was there before sitting down. She wouldn't put it past Owen to pull the chair back a few inches to make her fall and look a fool.

As soon as Leah was assured the chair was where it should be, she sat down and took a gulp of her drink, gathering her wits. Owen seemed to be buttering her up for something, so whatever it was, it must be of some magnitude.

Upon seating himself beside her, Owen tilted his head to the side and studied her with a puckered brow. "You look very well this evening, Leah." His words almost seemed to be an afterthought or something that he had meant to keep in his mind.

"Do you make all the ladies swoon with such compliments?" She placed her glass down as carefully as she could. Her fingers were clasped around it so tightly that it almost hurt. She shook her head.

"I'm sorry. I do not mean it backhandedly. You are just . . . different."

A servant appeared just behind her, ladling a small portion of pea soup into her bowl and she tried to hide a grimace. She and peas had always had a complicated relationship. "Thank you. You look different as well."

Owen pursed his lips, staring down at the green substance in his bowl before giving a nervous laugh. "I can now see how that does not sound very flattering." He lifted his spoon, dipping it into his soup and taking a large, yet quiet, sip. He looked back to her as he held his head over his bowl. "You know you have to eat that. It does not matter how much you hate peas."

Leah narrowed her eyes, crossing her arms over her chest. "Did you have

anything to do with the planning of our meal?”

“What?” Owen laughed, his face incredulous. His mouth smiled but his furrowed brow held questions. “Why would I have had anything to do with the dinner arrangement?”

Leah put a hand to her head. What was coming over her? She had begun this weekend wanting to run away, then told herself that perhaps Owen had changed, then pendulumed back to thinking the worst of him. Now she was accusing him of changing the dinner menu.

Perhaps this is what he wanted. To put her off guard and make her think she was losing her mind when inside he was really trying to figure out a way to pull a stunt of his own. She forced a laugh. “Of course. How silly of me. You are not the same boy you once were.” She picked up her spoon, hesitantly filling it with the thick soup. If she went slowly enough, perhaps they would clear the plates and begin the next course before she had to eat any.

“Are you all right, Leah? Perhaps Jonas was on to something earlier.”

Drat. Why could she not be the subtle, scheming young woman she wished to be? Perhaps engaging in common conversation would be enough to disarm him and make her look less suspicious. “I’m sorry. I did not sleep well last night and it seems to be catching up with me.”

“I am very sorry to hear that.”

“It is nothing. Just an owl outside my window keeping me up.” She closed her eyes, inwardly chastising herself. Why could she not be smooth and discreet? No. She had to make up lies about owls outside of her window. As if that happened every day.

If Owen thought anything of her ridiculous reason for not sleeping, however, he was polite enough to keep it to himself. “I see.” He focused back on his soup, finishing it with one last bite.

“So, you mentioned the business with your father. Is it going well?”

“Very well.” He wiped his mouth with his napkin. “Father has been teaching me the ropes with the hope that I will run a store of my own. We have one in Banbury already, plus the shop in Carterton, but we plan to open another in the next couple of years, which would be my baby, if you will.”

“That sounds like a large undertaking.”

“Yes. Grandfather always liked to play things safe, but my father pushed the limits a bit further. I feel it is a rite of passage for me to try my hand at expanding as well.” He sat back in his seat, his face becoming more animated and a smile forming on his lips as he tucked a fist under his chin. “It means my father thinks I am responsible enough to step out on my own.” Owen turned toward her, his smile softening. “It means that he trusts me to do the job.”

She sat back slightly as a servant took her bowl away, still full of the soup. “And can you support a family with this business of yours?”

His cheeks flushed and he sat up straighter, his smile disappearing in a flash. “Well, yes, assuming the young lady does not expect a mansion such as Stonehill or extravagant gifts.”

Oh dear. Hopefully he did not think she meant anything by her remark. It had been an offhanded thought, but when she put it in light of both of their circumstances, it could sound a bit forward. Luckily, she was saved from speaking by the next dish being served. She stared at the aspic and was more convinced than ever that Owen *did* in fact plan this menu. This particular variety of aspic appeared to be ham, egg and peas all surrounded by quivering gelatin.

When he looked at their plates and caught her disgusted face, he shook his head, wagging his finger at her. “No. I did not plan this. You cannot blame

this on me.”

“Of course not. You do not hold such sway in this house.” She could not go the entirety of the meal without eating anything, so she carefully lifted her fork and knife, cutting off the smallest sliver of food. If the bite was small enough, she might not taste it.

As the gelatinous meat slid into her mouth, a sudden idea sprouted in her mind. She looked at Owen from the corner of her eye.

“I have the play ready if we would like to put it on tonight.” She spoke around the meat tucked into the corner of her cheek, swallowing it down just as Owen turned to her.

He seemed excited about the idea, his lips smiling. If only he knew what she had planned for him. “That sounds like a perfect activity for the evening. Does it require study first?”

“No, I rather think it is better to feel the emotions in time while reading it. It’s more . . . genuine.”

He scrunched his brow, giving a nod. “Very well. I look forward to it.”

As did she.

Chapter 9

OWEN. EVENING OF THE SECOND DAY.



Owen sat on the settee between Graham and Jonas, reclining comfortably as the fire crackled away in the hearth. This was what he needed. Peace, comfort and good friends by his side.

“Did you do something to vex Leah?” Jonas pulled a small pillow from the edge of the settee, placing it behind his head and leaning back. One of the tassels tickled Owen’s cheek as it brushed past him.

“Me?” He was about to deny it, then quickly remembered the snowball. He gave Jonas a sideways glance before he rubbed his cheek where the golden tassel had assaulted him. “Why do you ask?”

Jonas shrugged as he settled into his pillow. “She seemed off this evening.”

“And that is surprising?”

Jonas chuckled. “Not when you are around.”

“Does she really still hold a grudge?” Owen sat up, watching Jonas as he kept his eyes blissfully closed.

“She seems to.”

Owen scoffed. “As if I’m the only one to blame. Her stubbornness can be infuriating at times. I only wish she would lighten up.” Then he thought back to their conversation at dinner, plucking the cuff link on the end of his shirt. “I don’t think she is upset. Not truly. We had a rather civil conversation at dinner tonight.”

“Forget I mentioned it.” Jonas swiped his hand in the air and put his foot up on his knee.

Leah strode into the room, holding stacks of paper which she began handing out to everyone. Owen let his eyes wash over her. She was distracting him, and he found it rather odd. But, they were both older now—in a place in their life where settling down was not only something one thought of passively, but actively. They were of an age when it would be expected of them to marry.

But not to each other.

He shook his head. This wasn’t the first time he had been distracted by her since his arrival. He had also found himself in a similar situation during their toboggan race, resulting in their untimely crash. She had assumed he did it on purpose, but he had simply been watching her as she glided down the hill, a smile on her face and her laughter bubbling out of her. And then, his sled had gravitated toward her and before he could stop it, they had collided. He had tried to call out, but it was too late.

Now, Leah stood in front of him, handing him his little papers to read from. And then his eyes landed on the title and he read the name on the part.

Donkey Number Two.

His mouth dropped open, and he looked up at her. He only caught her eye for a moment before she moved on, handing another stack of papers to Jonas

and then Miranda, but he was certain her cheek had lifted in a mirthful smile.

Donkey Number *Two*? Was there even a Donkey Number *One*? His lines were quite simple at the very least. ‘*Bleet.*’ Or his personal favorite. ‘*Meh.*’ It only took thirty seconds to read all his lines for they simply repeated themselves with minor variations. She even threw in a dialogue description after two consecutive ‘*hee-haw*’s. Her exact words? *With feeling.*

Perhaps her emotions toward him were not as friendly as he had thought.

“Leah, what is this?” He held his papers in the air, shaking them to garner her attention.

She turned innocent eyes in his direction. “What do you mean?”

“What do I mean?” He stood. “It says ‘Donkey Number Two’.”

“Yes,” she said, nodding.

“Is this an error?”

“No. I fear I lost the lines for Donkey Number One so I had to give you the second part. I hope you do not mind.”

He smacked the papers against his knee. “I do mind. I do not want to be a donkey, for goodness sake.”

“The other part seems to have gotten lost.” She sighed, then jerked her head up, clapping her hands. “Shall we begin?”

Jonas stood, giving Owen an all-knowing grin. Leah was upset. That much was clear.

But he only had four more days, and he wasn’t going to spend it pretending to be a flea-ridden donkey. And no, he had not added the flea-ridden part. That was explicitly stated in his character description at the top of the first page.

He took in her haughty look, her face stoic. Was she repaying him? Of all the years they had known each other, she had never once retaliated for all the

little tricks he had played on her. She would merely stomp her foot or whine or go running to her parents. But this? This was different. And it meant that he had to change his plans for the weekend. No longer was this a trip for relaxing and reminiscing.

His eyes settled on her, and she jerked slightly when she met his gaze. Was he smiling? He corrected his face, swallowing and averting his eyes. If she was going to play this game, she did not know what she was getting herself into. He had many more years of practice than she did.

Why was this making his blood thrum in his veins? Perhaps people *didn't* change. If the idea of pulling pranks on Leah Thompson was just as compelling as it had once been, he really hadn't matured as much as he thought. But, it was also temporary. Just the next few days. Then, it was back to work.

“All right, Donkey Number Two.” Jonas came over, shoving Owen's shoulder down until he was forced to kneel on the ground.

Owen looked around at all six of the siblings, every single one snickering at him. “Is this really necessary? Could I not be an evolved donkey? One perhaps with magical powers that can speak?”

“Oh, you can speak.” Leah kept her face even, though Owen swore he saw something flicker across her lips. It was so quick that he wasn't sure if he actually saw it or imagined it. “You have at least ten lines if I remember correctly.”

“Yes, but they are all animal sounds.” He shook the paper again.

“They are very important to the plot of the story,” Leah insisted. “One line is what garners the attention of the fair maiden. If it weren't for your dramatic and dynamic braying, then she would walk by the hero without a backward glance.”

“Fine,” he bit out. “I will be the donkey.”

Jonas patted his head. “Good boy.”

Owen swatted his hand away, sitting on a pillow on the ground to make his predicament a bit more comfortable.

The play began, Cecily playing the leading lady, and Graham reluctantly playing opposite her. In time, Owen found he got over being the donkey and sat back to enjoy all of them laughing at their silly mistakes or poor acting skills.

It came up to his first line and he had two choices. He could be a wet blanket—be embarrassed and let Leah win—or he could embrace his role and give it all he had.

The choice was easy.

Cecily began walking across the room and he was supposed to make a sound as if in great pain. He rolled onto his side, laying with his one leg limply out in front of him as if injured, giving his best impression of a donkey in agony.

“Hee-hawwww.”

The room fell silent. Cecily stopped, putting a hand to her mouth before bursting out in a laugh while the rest of the siblings erupted in a roar. Miranda had to take a seat because she was laughing so hard.

Even Leah was holding her mouth, snickering before clearing her throat and settling her features.

“Owen,” Rose said, chuckling on the floor. “That is the best donkey sound I have ever heard.”

Leah narrowed her eyes and pursed her lips before finally giving an unimpressed shrug. “I’ve heard better.”

Owen propped himself up on his elbow, glaring at her. “How many

attempts at being a donkey have you witnessed?”

Then, without missing a beat or showing any crack in her exterior, she replied, “Three.”

He worked his jaw for a second before sitting up fully. “I want to hear your best attempt then.”

“Me?” She reared back. “Why would I make a donkey sound?”

“If you are going to be hypercritical, I feel you should at least be willing to show me how you would like it done.”

“Nonsense. We have a play to finish.”

“I don’t know,” Jonas said, leaning against the wall. He crossed one leg in front of the other while inspecting his nail beds. “I think Owen is correct. I want to hear your best attempt. If you aren’t pleased with his performance, perhaps you could switch roles.”

“I am playing a lady. I do not believe Owen would wish for my part.”

“It cannot be worse than playing a donkey,” Owen uttered under his breath.

“Yes, Leah.” Miranda joined the camaraderie. “I believe you should show us your best donkey impression.”

“No, that’s really not—”

“Yes, oh please, Leah!” Rose bounced on the ground while clapping her hands. “It would almost be like a game of acting charades. I am rather bored with this play anyway. I would much rather do that.”

“Give the people what they wish for, Leah,” Owen prompted. She could not deny them all, could she? And he would love nothing more than to hear her attempt to sound like a donkey.

“If I do it, would you all agree to move on with the play?” She glanced about the room and one by one they all nodded their agreement. She sighed,

putting a hand to her brow for a brief moment before letting it fall to her side.
“Very well. I shall try.”

Leah cleared her throat, as if readying herself for a grandiose vocal performance. She shifted her feet and raised her chin. Then, with as much pride in her eyes as a young woman could muster whilst pretending to be a donkey, she let out the most horrid and unconvincing, “*Hee-haw.*”

Her face turned red as a ripe cherry, and the whole room erupted in laughter all over again.

But as they laughed, Owen found himself watching her and smiling. He crossed his arms over his chest, leaning his back against the chair that sat behind him. She did it. She rose to the occasion, and whilst it seemed to embarrass her to no end, she did not run away and pout. She embraced the moment and did not cower.

He had to respect that change in her.

The rest of the play went by with more laughs than actual acting skills, but that was the entire point. At least, it was to Owen. It brought them together and filled the house with cheer. What could be a more appropriate thing at Christmastime?

Chapter 10

LEAH. MORNING OF THE THIRD DAY.



Leah's first attempt at trickery had been a massive failure. While Owen had seemed frustrated with his role at first, he quickly dove into the part of Donkey Number Two with aplomb and made the entire evening full of laughter. She would have been more frustrated if she hadn't been so pleased to see all of them laughing together and enjoying themselves. How could she begrudge that? Especially when it had all been her idea in the first place. He took the measly, silly role she'd offered him and turned it into the highlight of the night.

But she wouldn't give up so easily. She only had to try harder. Think of something more clever.

And then it happened. Everything clicked into place and a slow, deliciously-wicked grin crept across her lips. "Rebecca?" Leah tried to sound uninterested as she called her maid's attention.

Rebecca held the soft green gown Leah had specified she wished to wear. Rebecca reached her arm far out in front of her as she inspected it for any trace of wrinkles. Her faintly red hair sprung about her face, and while the fabric of her gown was a simple brown and made of rough fabric, Leah was still struck by how lovely she was—if a bit silly. But that was precisely what Leah needed at the moment.

Rebecca lightly draped the gown over her arm as she walked over to Leah. “Yes, miss?”

“Where is your rabbit’s foot?”

Rebecca’s head jerked toward her. She knew what Leah thought of the furry little object. “Why?” Skepticism marred her forehead, her copper brows leery as she waited for Leah to continue.

“Well,” Leah said with a sigh. She needed to somehow negate what she had said the other day. It was not likely Rebecca would offer up her little treasure after Leah had conveyed such an obvious distaste for it. “I have been thinking about the merits of such a thing. And I had rather hoped you would lend it to me.”

Rebecca opened her mouth, but silence ensued.

“You see, Mr. Turner being here has me worried that he will resort to his old tricks. I would like to be prepared. Perhaps your rabbit’s foot would somehow protect me?”

“But you teased me so.” Rebecca instinctively clutched the edge of her gown where the furry object likely spent most of its days.

Leah shook her head. “I did. But I could use your help. Please?” Leah turned her lips down, clasping her hands over her lap.

Rebecca hesitated a moment. She sighed, reaching into the skirts of her dress and pulling out the familiar foot. “I would like to have it back before

too long if at all possible.”

“Oh, Rebecca, thank you.” Leah stood, reaching out with a smile as she took the foot. She had to swallow the bitterness that threatened to scorch the back of her throat as she took it in her grasp. It was the most odd feeling. She could trace all the little bones in the toes, yet it was also incredibly soft. Which was to be expected. It was rabbit’s fur after all. “I shall take good care of it. Thank you.”

Leah gave Rebecca a quick glance. She watched Leah’s movements carefully as Leah reached behind her and placed it on the outermost edge of her bed.

When assured of its safety, Rebecca’s shoulders lowered slightly. “You are welcome.” She tucked an unruly red curl behind her ear. “Now, shall we get you dressed?”

After readying for the day, Leah made her way to breakfast, concealing her furry foot under the cuff of her short, beige glove. It tickled something awful and made her skin crawl to know it was wedged between her wrist and glove. Yes—they were her oldest and most worn pair, but that did not mean she wished them such a fate as this.

Walking toward the table, she made for the least-likely chair. The one directly by Owen. She sat down, being careful not to smile.

“Good morning, Leah,” Owen said, holding a piping hot cup of tea in his hand as he glanced over at her. She watched the steam swirl up into the air, kissing his brow as he took a sip before it disappeared altogether.

Her eyes lingered along his profile for a moment longer than she cared to admit. She cleared her throat. “Good morning.”

Owen swallowed another swig of tea, then tightened his lips. “Or rather, shall I say, hee-haw?” He tilted his head, barely smiling.

She allowed a brief chuckle, lightly touching the lump under her glove to remind her of her task. “Yes, you did a spectacular job last evening. I will never think of the role of Donkey Number Two the same way again.”

“Well, I do like to put my best into whatever I do.”

“Oh?”

He shrugged. “I would like to think so, anyway.”

“Well, it must be true to some extent if your father is entrusting you with running your own store. That seems like quite an undertaking.”

That same soft smile he had when last discussing the topic appeared, warming his features. Yet another moment involving Owen that she now found endearing.

“Yes. Monday I am going to begin my search for a place to stay in Carterton.”

Her fork clattered to the table. “Here?” She picked her utensil back up, being sure she had a firm grip this time.

“Before I choose a location for a new shop, I am going to spend some time managing the shop *here* as it is already established. After a year or two, I will start looking for places elsewhere. I also have to research the market and see what place would be most economical or profitable. But, in the meantime, I will get to pester you all the more.” He narrowed his eyes, smiling. Gone was the endearing smile, replaced by his haughty, presumptuous one.

She sighed, looking down at her plate. “Oh, joy.”

“You cannot fool me, you know.”

She rolled her eyes. “What?”

“I believe you enjoy it.”

“Being humiliated? Yes, I cannot imagine anything more enjoyable than being scared, embarrassed . . . shall I go on?”

He wiped his mouth with his napkin, but it did nothing to remove that mischievous look from his lips. It remained, and if she was not mistaken, widened a bit further.

“The pranks were quite harmless, Leah. And that was so long ago.” He laid the rumpled napkin on his leg before running a hand up the back of his neck.

Harmless? He did not know what it was like to be a young lady of gentle breeding. And his words only fanned the flames of her desire to give him a taste of his own medicine.

Her heart raced as she tried to find the most opportune moment to reveal her treasure. She was having a hard time finding the courage to implement her plan, and hated to admit it to herself. The desire to do so was overwhelming, but she had not expected the slight nausea that was filling her stomach. If *Owen* were in her shoes he would not even hesitate. He would be as calm and collected as ever—and enjoying every single moment of it.

“Leah?” She turned at his voice and his brow creased. “Are you going to be ill?”

Ill? Did she always make her feelings so obvious to those around her? “Oh, no. I am fine. I had only been remembering last evening’s meal.” She forced a laugh and his confusion only seemed to deepen, watching her as she gestured to her plate. “I seem to be more blessed this morning as to choices of food.”

He nodded slowly. “Yes. I suppose.”

She was beginning to lose her nerve. And if she didn’t rid the foot from her glove soon she was quite sure her skin would never recover. It already felt as if a rash was forming.

It was now or never.

“Rose,” Leah said, drawing her youngest sister's attention. Rose sat

precisely where Leah needed to avert Owen's attention. "You should tell Owen about the new dress Mother purchased for you at Brooke's shop."

Rose lit up at the opportunity to have not only Owen's attention, but a chance to talk about her most recent purchase. "Oh, yes. Owen, would you mind? Or would that be horridly dull?"

Owen smiled down the table at her. "Not at all. I would love to hear about it."

And just as Leah had hoped, Rose launched into an enthusiastic discourse on her new dress, going into great detail about the intricate overlay, delicate stitching and soft rose color that matched not only *her*, but also her name, perfectly.

While Owen was distracted by Rose's raptures, Leah slipped the furry foot out from her glove—inwardly wincing as one of the claws scraped across the delicate skin of her wrist in the process. Then, before she could back out or think better of it, she dropped it on the napkin on Owen's lap.

Leah waited, trying her best not to look at Owen as impatience overwhelmed her. She could have sworn he would have felt its weight as soon as she dropped it there, but he kept his eyes fastened on Rose, who didn't seem to be coming to a close of her vivid descriptions.

She didn't want Owen to stand from the table only to have the foot drop to the floor without him noticing. Failing twice was not an option. Surely she could figure out a way to draw his attention to it.

Leah reached forward, lifting her teacup and taking a sip before ever so delicately spilling it in Owen's lap.

His reaction was immediate, gasping and throwing his hands up as her hot tea soaked into his breeches.

"Leah." He reared back, balling up the napkin on his lap and standing as he

tried to blot his breeches dry.

She could have screamed. How could he not have seen the foot! He had quickly grabbed the napkin, apparently preserving the foot within the soft confines of the fabric. Well, Leah hoped the napkin and the foot would be very happy together, but this was not at all how it was supposed to happen.

“I’m sorry, Owen,” she said, standing beside him. “My hand had a twitch and your breeches seemed to take the brunt of it.”

“Brunt? I do not believe the tea landed anywhere other than my lap. See? The chair is in perfect order.” He jerked his head down at his seat before grimacing and transferring his wiping from his breeches to his hands. His brow wrinkled and his wiping slowed. “What on earth?” He opened the cloth, and all Leah saw was a small bit of brown before the napkin went flying into the air.

The napkin seemed to float—almost as if time had suspended it, the cloth slowly unfolding as it made its way over the table. The foot tumbled out of its folds, gently spinning as it descended.

And then it landed in the middle of Jonas’ plate.

“Ah!” Jonas flung his hand out, hitting the foot as well as several items of food. A clatter rang out while the foot and food all went spraying toward Cecily.

Cecily reared back at the contact. She didn’t seem to notice the foot. “Jonas, do you mind?” She brushed food off her front, reaching out toward her own napkin. And then she saw the brown vermin sitting beside her glass. She stood with a scream, tipping her chair over and falling backwards to the floor. Their mother immediately ran over to Cecily to be sure she was all right, helping her to stand.

Leah covered her mouth, unsure whether she should laugh or cry. But

before she could decide which emotion was stronger, she felt a heaviness lingering on her back—her spine tingling. She turned and there stood Owen, staring at her with his mouth agape.

“What?” she asked as innocently as she could.

He narrowed his eyes and took a quick step toward her, leaning his head close to her ear. The tingling on her spine multiplied a thousand times and her breath caught.

“I know that was you,” Owen whispered into her ear. He lingered, the space between them suffocatingly small, and Leah wasn’t sure if she should pull away or stand her ground. Owen looked down at her, then took a small step back, allowing some much-needed space between them.

She put a hand to her stomach, finally able to take a breath. And then she remembered what he accused her of. Ignorance seemed the best response to such a claim. “Excuse me? I do not know what you mean.”

“It’s a rabbit’s foot!” Graham shouted.

Leah spun about to find Graham holding the foot up in the air. He looked around the room. “How ever did a rabbit’s foot end up on the table?”

And then every eye in the room snapped to Owen.

“What?” Owen asked, placing one hand on his hip and holding a finger in the air with the other. “I did not do this. I swear.”

“Who else would bring a rabbit’s foot to breakfast?” Cecily asked, still scowling after her fall.

Owen’s eyes flicked to Leah for a second before dropping to the table. “I do not know, but it wasn’t me.”

He could have tried to out her, but there was no way Leah’s family would believe she had been the one to bring a rabbit’s foot as a guest to breakfast. And apparently Owen figured the same.

“Well, it wasn’t me,” Rose said, crossing her arms over her chest. “A young lady would never have anything to do with a filthy rabbit’s foot.”

“Truer words have never been spoken, Rose,” Leah agreed. “Now, if you will excuse me, I must write a letter to Amelia.” She turned on her heel, hastening toward the door before more questions could be asked.

“Leah, wait,” Owen called after her.

She paused at the door, putting her hand against the wooden frame but refusing to look back. Owen’s steps clacked against the floor, stopping when he reached her side.

“I believe you forgot something.” His voice was low, but she thought she heard a slight vein of humor in his tone.

She knew before looking what it would be. “Thank you.” Letting go of the doorframe, she turned and snatched the furry foot from his grasp. Just as she went to pull her hand back, his fingers closed over hers like a trap springing into motion around its unsuspecting prey. A slight gasp slipped from her lips.

“Owen, whatever are you—”

“—I know that was you, Leah. You just admitted as much by taking this disgusting thing back.”

Drat. She had given herself away. But she was too proud and stubborn to allow him the satisfaction of acknowledging it. She scoffed. “Why would I commit such a childish prank?” He hadn’t let go of her hand and his fingers caressed her wrist.

“Because of the snowball I presume?” Instead of only a hint of amusement in his eyes, they were now full of it.

She decided to continue with ignorance. There was no way of *proving* she had anything to do with the foot. “Snowball?” She looked back down at her wrist.

Did he not have any qualms about holding her hand so long? And in front of her family? Perhaps he thought she would run away if he did not hold her anchored—and he would be correct. Luckily, her family seemed more occupied with putting the table to rights than with what she and Owen were discussing.

He nodded. “But I fear I must warn you that whatever thread of dignity kept me from participating before is now broken.”

“You are speaking in riddles. I have no idea what you are talking about.”

She jerked her hand back, keeping the foot, no matter how loath she was to do so. A promise of its safe return had been made, and she would keep her word.

Leah walked through the door, but just as she was about to round up the stairs, she heard Owen’s low voice.

“The game is afoot.”

Chapter 11

LEAH. AFTERNOON OF THE THIRD DAY.



Leah sat at her window, replaying the whole foot ordeal in her mind, and to her great surprise—she found herself laughing.

First there had been Owen’s face as he finally found the foot in his napkin, and then Jonas’ flinging food across the table at Cecily and Cecily’s falling to the floor . . .

Leah shook her head. Who would have known that something as silly as a fairly harmless prank could bring such entertainment.

A knock sounded on her door, and Rose poked her head into the room before Leah could ask who was there.

“Yes, Rose. Do help yourself and come in.” Leah smiled to herself, walking across the room and pulling her shawl tighter around her shoulders against the chill.

“I’m sorry, Leah. But everyone is going outside to get some evergreen trimmings for the table this evening and I thought you would want to go.”

Leah hadn't spent much time out in the snow, and if she didn't take advantage now, it might very well be melted by tomorrow. "I will get ready and meet you outside."

Cecily rushed in and Miranda trailed just behind her.

"Do you think Mama will have mistletoe this year?" Cecily asked with a twinkle in her eye. She walked over to Leah's bed, flopping back onto it.

"You are not thinking of stealing a kiss this year are you? The Cluetts will be coming to Christmas dinner." Leah walked to her wardrobe, grabbing her warmest cloak.

Cecily shook her head as she looked up to the white canopy over Leah's bed. "Me? Heavens no. I cannot even bear the thought. But I had noticed you and Owen seemed to be getting along rather well, and you *are* of age."

Leah stopped with one arm half-way into her sleeve, glancing back at her sister. "As are you."

Cecily waved her off, choosing to ignore the implication.

"Please tell me you have no expectations of Owen and me." And then to Leah's shock and horror, the vivid image of herself and Owen kissing came to the forefront of her mind. Surely it was natural after her sister's mentioning of it. It was the same as someone mentioning a frog and then the picture simply forms in your mind. Leah did not really *want* it to happen. But how did she make the thought go away?

Leah yanked her cloak off, suddenly overwhelmed with warmth. "I shall put this on outside. It is rather stuffy in here." She draped it over her arm, striding to the door where Rose stood with a conspiring grin.

"I am not warm," Miranda said. She stepped farther into the room.

"Let us go outside, hm?" Leah insisted.

Rose rolled onto the tips of her toes before slinking back onto her heels. "I

think you love Owen.”

Leah burst out of the room, grabbing Rose’s arm, pulling her into the hall and towards the back stairs. “Rather the opposite actually.”

Footsteps followed as Miranda and Cecily hastened to catch up. Miranda came up beside Leah, taking her arm. “But he is so handsome. Do you not think he is handsome?”

Leah rolled her eyes. “I suppose I must admit he has a certain symmetry to his features that some might find attractive.”

Rose was barely keeping up with Leah’s determined pace, her little voice coming from somewhere behind them. “Symmetry? What about his face is symmetrical?”

Leah let out a sigh, slowing her steps. She kept her voice low as she pulled on her thick gloves. “His eyes are a good distance apart.”

“You are overthinking it. Being attractive is not mathematical.” Miranda crossed her arms. “I spend enough time on arithmetic as it is. I do not need it to be involved in matters of the heart.”

Cecily laughed. “Matters of the heart? You are only thirteen, Miranda.”

“And even I, as a very young lady, can tell you that finding someone attractive has nothing to do with symmetry of features. It has to do with the way they make you feel.”

The girls stopped just short of the back door and Leah threw on her cloak. “Enough of this talk. Now let us get outside and collect some trimmings for the table.” She glanced at her youngest sister and nearly groaned. “Where is your cloak, Rose?”

Rose touched her shoulder, as if she just now realized she was not properly dressed to be out of doors. “Oh, I seem to have forgotten it.”

Miranda tossed her hair. “Perhaps you became distracted by *someone*

needing to discuss arithmetic.”

“All right, you and Cecily get outside.” Leah grabbed their arms, leading them to the door at the end of the hall where they gave her a parting smile before exiting into the bright white outdoors. Leah strode back to Rose. “And you need to go and get your cloak.”

“I will be back quicker than a dog on the hunt!” And then she turned and ran down the hall.

Leah waited by the door, pulling up her hood and peering out the small window. Eventually, she heard muffled footsteps and turned, expecting to see her sister.

But it was someone much different. Someone that she could no longer see without thinking of kissing him under the mistletoe due to her meddling little sisters.

“Owen.” Leah tried to say his name with as much indifference as she could muster. She had years of practice, she only needed to distract herself from thoughts of his lips being on hers.

He gave her an amused grin, stopping short of their exit. “Leah.”

Could he read her face? Did he know where her thoughts were? He was quite clever, much as she hated to admit it, but he was certainly not a mind reader. There was no way to know what she was thinking unless she said the words aloud, which she never planned to do. Never, ever, ever.

“I am waiting for Rose. She forgot her cloak.”

“Ah. I see. Shall I wait with you?”

She glanced up at the doorway on the off-chance Rose hid mistletoe and had planned this very thing. Forgot her cloak *indeed*. But, much to Leah’s great relief, there was nothing.

She looked anywhere but at Owen’s face. Perhaps if she didn’t see his lips

she wouldn't keep thinking of them. "If you would like to wait, you are more than welcome. Rose should be back any moment." She smiled. "I am sure she is in a great rush so as not to miss anything."

"Yes, she certainly does not like to miss out." They both chuckled, looking about the small hall during the awkward silence that ensued. "I'm surprised you are still here. Were you not going to leave for your friend's when possible?"

Leah shrugged, leaning back against the wall. "I doubt I shall leave now. It is Christmas in two days and I do not want to spend it away from my family. Besides, we invited the Cluetts for Christmas dinner. So I will get to see Amelia then."

"Do the Cluetts have any sons?"

Her eyes found his. "Yes, two. Though they are only seventeen and fourteen. But Graham gets on with them well."

"Ah, yes. Very good." He shifted his feet.

She tilted her head. "Why?"

"Oh, no reason." He straightened, not meeting her eye. "It's just . . . I had thought you would be married by now." The wind made the door creak and Owen turned to inspect it, pushing on the handle to be sure it was shut. But it almost seemed to Leah that he was attempting to distract himself. His fascination with the squeaky door was . . . intriguing.

"I am not so old am I? I do not think I shall resort to seventeen year olds just yet."

He choked on a laugh, running his hand up into his hair. "No, I should hope not. I do not believe your father would be pleased with your choice."

"What about you? No young lady has caught your eye?"

"My eye perhaps, but not my heart."

The hall seemed to grow smaller and every sound became louder. This conversation was more intimate than anything they had discussed before, and it was not helping the mistletoe thoughts remain where they should be. Hidden for eternity.

“You have been busy,” she said coolly, looking down to the patterned rug that lined the hall.

He cleared his throat. “Quite. And I want to be sure I can support a family. I hope to have that luxury soon, but that does not mean a young woman shall suddenly sprout up when the time comes.”

Leah looked up and couldn’t help but smile at the image he created or the slight stiffness in Owen’s movements. He was feeling vulnerable. “I do not mean to laugh at you, but your words painted a rather vivid picture.”

“I do seem to have a way with words, don’t I? Of the human *and* animal sort.”

She laughed again, leaning her head back as she did so. “I will never see a donkey again without thinking of you.”

Owen leaned his shoulder against the door, smiling at her. “I guess it was worth it then.”

Oh dear. Were they *flirting*? Was Owen flirting with her? And even more unnerving—was she flirting with *him*?

“I am sorry that took so long.” Rose ran down the hall, catching her breath. “But I forgot I had left my cloak by the scullery.”

“The scullery? Why was it there?” Leah fiddled with her hood. Anything to distract herself from the conversation she and Owen had just shared.

“You know how hungry I get after playing outside. Well, yesterday after tobogganing I went straight to the kitchen to see if Mrs. Bowles had the chocolate ready, and when she told me it wasn’t, I may have had a cake or

two. And it's so blasted hot in that kitchen when they are all cooking, that I took my cloak off and then ran off and forgot all about it."

Owen laughed behind his hand as he stared at Rose, no doubt finding great amusement in her cursing.

"Rose, you should not curse. It is not ladylike."

"But you do it." She stuck a hand on her hip and Leah felt like she was staring at a younger version of herself. Heaven help her.

"Never mind that. It is growing warmer in here by the moment and I should like to get outside."

"Yes! Let us go." Rose brushed past them, opening the door and letting in a welcomed burst of cool air.

Owen waited, smiling at her before gesturing for her to go ahead of him.

Leah walked out into the sun, staring up at the glittering white, coating the branches. She needed to forget what had just happened in that hall, or she would never finish exacting her revenge. And that would be a shame, for she had recently found, she actually quite enjoyed it.

Chapter 12

OWEN. AFTERNOON OF THE THIRD DAY.



Owen trailed after Leah, watching her with a newfound curiosity. He had rather enjoyed making her blush, and she had been more than a bit pleasant to converse with. He had made a point not to mention the foot—for that would only remind her that he was planning a trick of his own. She had been the one to start the game anyway. He was only playing along.

Rose had run ahead to the copse of trees where Graham, Jonas, Miranda, and Cecily already stood, clipping boughs to trim the table. Leah walked along at a rather decent stride, and Owen struggled to keep up in the almost knee-deep snow.

“Goodness, Leah, how do you walk so fast?”

She kept trudging ahead, not looking back or indicating she had heard him, so he pushed himself harder until he was right behind her. “I said, how do you walk so fast?”

“Huh!” She gasped, her eyes flying wide open and putting a hand to her chest as her steps halted.

“Well, not so much now.”

She bent over, catching her breath. “You scared me half to death.”

“How is that possible? I followed you out. Did you not hear me just now?”

“Just now?” She straightened, running the back of her hand lightly across her brow.

“Yes. I had asked you that question just before, only, you did not seem to hear me.”

“Oh, yes. I was only thinking of . . . greenery.”

He pulled his brow down. “Greenery?”

“I was trying to envision how much we might need and what types would look best.”

He took note of her flushed cheeks, likely from the cool air. And then his eyes trailed down to her lips. “You were not thinking of mistletoe, were you?”

“—No! Of course not. Why would you ask such a thing?”

He tried not to laugh. “I was only teasing because of what you said about your friends’ brothers.”

“Oh.” Her shoulders relaxed, her breathing still coming quickly. “Yes. I knew that.”

“You did? Because just now you seemed rather taken aback.”

“No, I just . . .” Her words trailed off and she looked over his shoulder. “We had better help them soon or they shall be finished before we even begin.”

“What—” He watched her in confusion as she strode past him toward her siblings without looking back.

He turned and followed her to the trees where everyone was gathering boughs. Leah started right in, but she seemed distracted.

Would now be the opportune time to pull a prank of his own? She had pulled not only one, but two so far. Surely it was fair for him to retaliate a bit, especially considering he had given her fair warning just this morning.

She snipped and clipped and began filling a basket that laid on the ground by her feet, quickly piling it with the greens. Owen snatched a small clump of needles, tucking them into his palm as best he could, keeping them hidden as he made his way to Leah's side.

"Oh." She glanced up at him before turning back to the tree. "Did you need something?"

"No. This just seemed like it had some very nice boughs."

"Yes." She clipped a branch, missing a small piece that held it to the tree. Her mouth set and she gave the branch a tug until it snapped free, then she placed it with the others. "I thought it seemed like a good spot."

Owen glanced down at her shoulder. A small part of him was hesitant to follow through, but she was the one who put a foot in his napkin this morning. Surely pine needles wouldn't be such a bad thing. He reached up, snapping a few boughs and allowing the pleasant conversation of everyone present to fill his ears. And when Leah seemed to finally relax after whatever anxiety their earlier conversation had caused, he reached above her head, pretending to work on the branch over her.

He rustled the branch, shaking it and sending some snow sprinkling down on her.

She brushed her hood back off her head, allowing the snow to fall to the ground. "Owen, do you mind?"

"I'm sorry. I cannot get this pesky thing."

She rolled her shoulders. “Then move on to another.”

“Ah, wait. I seem to have gotten it.” He gave the branch another rustle, dropping his palmed needles. “Leah, spider!” he yelled, jumping back.

Her eyes flew wide and she reached back to her neck where the needles fell between the collar of her jacket. “Well, don’t just stand there. Get it out!” She brushed her hands over her neck in a frenzy. But it didn’t take long for the needles to fall to the snow.

“Oh, good. You seem to have gotten it.” Owen nodded, leaning against the trunk of the tree as Leah stared at the green needles.

“They were simply pine needles.” She turned unamused eyes up to him. “There was no spider, was there?”

He smiled, using his hand to hide his mouth. “I must have gotten them confused. It really seemed like a spider at the time. But I must admit that now that I have a better look—” He made a show of glancing down where the needles fell. “They look very much like pine needles.”

Leah crouched down to the snow, running her hand over the area. And quick as a flash, she balled up a fistful of snow and threw it directly at his face. “Well,” she said, with a smile in her voice. “That was very satisfying.”

Owen used his fingers to scrape the snow from his eyes, flicking it to the ground. “Oh, you have asked for it now, Leah.”

She held a hand up. “Oh no. That was only in retaliation for what you did.”

“What I did?” He laughed and reached down for some snow. Leah slowly backed away with a hand out in front of her to ward him off. “You are the one who put a foot on my lap this morning and made me play a donkey last evening.” He began tossing and catching the ball of snow in his hand as he watched her.

“But only because you ran into me with your toboggan!” She insisted.

He shook his head. "I told you that was a mistake. And it was. But now we have a predicament."

She stared at his hand with reticence. "What is our predicament?"

"I fear I must throw this snowball at you."

She spun around, running as fast as a lady could in deep snow while wearing a dress. He threw his icy weapon at her retreating form, but it went just a tad too far to the right, missing her by a few inches.

Leah turned to him. "Ha! You missed me."

Owen shot off from the tree, running after her and sending her running again. She kept glancing over her shoulder as she laughed, trying to keep ahead of him. "Owen, no. Please don't," she said, stopping and reaching down for another handful of snow.

"What are you two doing," Rose yelled out after them.

"Owen is attempting to kill me with snow," Leah called back.

Owen shook his head. He turned back toward Rose who was now following along with Miranda and Graham just behind. "Your sister is a liar. She started it."

And then he took another face full of snow.

"Leah Thompson," he said, turning to her. "You have no room for excuses at this point."

She covered her mouth with her hands, laughing so hard that her whole body shook. "You should see your face. It is entirely white."

He blew a breath up, trying to clear some snow off his lashes before swiping the rest away with his sleeve. "Yes, if you can believe it, I can actually feel the snow on my face."

"I am sorry." But she didn't seem so as she was still laughing to herself. "I just could not help myself."

“You know what I must do now.”

And then, from behind, he heard another shout.

“It is war!”

Owen turned back to see Rose, Graham, Miranda, Cecily, and Jonas all running towards them with snow in their hands and shouting as if it was their battle cry.

He ran forward, grabbing Leah’s hand and pulling her along with him toward a bush. “The enemy is upon us,” he yelled. Balls of snow all came hurtling toward them and Owen hooked an arm around Leah’s waist, pulling her down to the snow with him behind the safety of the bush.

They both laughed as they tumbled down into the soft snow, Owen’s hand resting against her waist. Owen could feel Leah’s waist move each time she inhaled and exhaled, both of them still catching their breath. Upon realizing that he still held her waist, Owen sat up onto his knees and cleared his throat, releasing his hold on her.

Leah sat up beside him, adjusting the hood of her jacket without meeting his eye. “So, what shall we do?”

“We seem to be surrounded.” He began forming lumps of snow as fast as he could. “We need to get to work before we are ambushed.”

Leah chuckled, setting to work. An occasional snowball would fall from overhead, but they weren’t hitting their mark. “I am sure Rose is all joy right now. She adores this sort of thing.”

“You all do. That is why I love coming here so much.” Owen filled his arms with the small mound of snowballs he had formed. “Wish me luck.” He stood, immediately getting smacked in the shoulder with a snowball that shattered into a small plume of white upon contact. It had been Jonas, of that Owen was sure. The aim was immaculate. Not to mention, Jonas was

grinning like a schoolboy who had somehow managed to get an extra sweet. Owen threw his snowballs, running out after throwing one at every assailant. He had hit two of the five. Not what he would consider a great success.

He ducked back behind the bush, forming more snowballs and checking on Leah's progress. She had a fairly sizable stack. But as she glanced at the pile she had made, she stilled.

"What?" he asked, keeping up the pace of his work.

"I am only surprised," she said quietly. A lump of snow fell from the sky and landed on her shoulder. She gasped, wiping it away and setting back to work.

Owen blindly lobbed a snowball over the bush from the ground. "What are you surprised about? That I was able to rescue you from our attackers? I am quite brave, you know."

She chuckled before throwing snow over the bush as well, keeping her seat on the ground. "I suppose I did not realize how much you loved to spend time with all of us."

"How could you not? You were like a second family to me. Until we left of course." He stood, whipping a few more white orbs and this time, every one hit their mark.

He sat back, his breath coming quickly. It was warmer outside than he had thought it would be, and the exercise was only increasing the heat. The snow might very well be melted by tomorrow.

Owen heard snow crunching on either side of their barricade and then the shadows of all five siblings cast over them, their arms raised, ready for attack. Owen held a hand up. "Wait. You cannot do this. Two against five hardly seems fair."

Jonas shook his head, shrugging apathetically. "Not my problem."

“Fire!” Rose shouted. And then the world turned white.

Chapter 13

LEAH. LATE AFTERNOON OF THE THIRD DAY.



Leah smiled to herself as she put away her things in her room. The afternoon hadn't been what she had expected, but the turn of events had been a pleasant surprise. She hadn't laughed so hard in ages, and it had left her feeling lighter and, somewhat surprisingly, happier.

After their impromptu snowball fight had come to an end, they had all come inside and had a cup of chocolate. Now, after changing into her day dress, Leah was ready to head downstairs and join them all as they trimmed the table with greens. And she had the perfect prank to pull on Owen.

Leah held a small amount of Epsom salt in the palm of her hand, being careful not to let it sift from her grasp or to have need of her hand before she could discreetly drop it into Owen's cup. Her mother had said she would provide punch whilst they all decorated, giving Leah the perfect opportunity to even the score with Owen.

As Leah made it to the dining room, her hand had already become sore from clenching it.

“Leah,” Cecily said, running over and taking her hand. “You must see how perfectly silly Owen and Jonas are being. It has been most entertaining.”

Leah kept her fist tightly balled, and Cecily gave it an odd glance before continuing to pull her along. “What are they up to now?”

Cecily ducked her head and chuckled. “They have made the table rather festive for dinner.”

Leah could only imagine what that meant. As they arrived at the table, Leah pulled her hand to her mouth to smother a laugh, almost forgetting to keep it fisted lest the precious salts fall out. “What is that supposed to be? A dog?”

“No, a squirrel,” Owen announced proudly. He leaned over the table, arranging greens into different animal shapes. None of which looked like a squirrel.

“Well, while I admire your effort, the execution seems to be lacking.”

Owen took a step back, studying his artistry before giving a final sigh. “I suppose. But it is more difficult than one would think. Look at Jonas’ turkey. It has not even the least resemblance to one.”

“That is because it is a pig,” Jonas defended.

“You know Mother will not allow this. She will expect a lovely decorated table for dinner.” Leah’s hand began to sweat within her glove and she worried if she didn’t dispense the salt soon, it would clump up in her grasp.

“We will fix it. Not to worry.” Jonas moved a bough a little to the left, giving a nod of approval.

“It still does not look like a turkey,” Miranda said, coming up behind the young men and looking at their creations.

Jonas shook his head. “I told you, it is supposed to be a pig.”

Leah glanced about the room and found what she was looking for. The punch bowl.

“Owen, would you care for a glass of punch?” Leah infused her voice with as much sweetness as she could manage without seeming suspicious.

He jerked up, tilting his head. His pause was uncomfortably long before he gave a suspicious and hesitant, “That would be fine.”

She nodded, gliding to the punch bowl. The warm, red liquid looked quite appealing, with slices of oranges floating on the top. Leah took a cup, slipping the salt in before ladling the warm liquid over top and gently tilting the cup to try and swirl it together.

“Jonas.” Her mother’s playfully scolding tone came to her ears. “What is all this?”

Leah turned around, careful not to splash the punch as she walked to Owen. She handed it to him and he took it before turning back to see what Jonas would have to say for himself.

“Yes, Jonas,” Owen said. “What is all of this? Your poor mother puts up with so much from you.”

“Oh, you do not have me fooled, Owen,” her mother said with a grin. “I know you had something to do with this as well.”

“Me? Nonsense.” Owen smiled, lifting his cup to his lips.

Leah held her breath in anticipation. Owen tilted the cup back, and the red liquid flowed from the cup into his mouth, before he quickly pulled the cup away. Owen cleared his throat, his cheeks bulging as he held the punch in his mouth before swallowing so deliberately that Leah could see the swell of his neck as he did so.

“Doesn’t Mother make the best punch, Mr. Turner?” Leah smiled and he narrowed his eyes in return.

“Yes. Quite. Very good.” He held the glass up to Mrs. Thompson before placing it ever so carefully back on the table.

“I say we have a toast,” Leah said. “Let us all get a glass.”

“I think a Christmas toast sounds like just the thing.” Jonas strode over to the table, helping himself to a glass of punch. The rest of the siblings followed, until they all stood around the table with their cups in hand.

“What should we toast to?” Graham asked. “Good health?”

“That is so boring,” Miranda said. “Why not to something about the new year?”

“New year, new friendships?” Cecily asked, her eyes twinkling as she looked over at Leah with her brow quirked.

“No,” Leah quickly added. “How about to—”

“—to change.” Owen lifted his glass up, training his gaze on Leah.

“Change?” Jonas asked. “That isn’t very festive.”

“I agree,” Miranda said. “How about a toast to Mother and Father? To their always being so tolerant of us?”

The rest of them chuckled and it was soon agreed upon that the toast would go to their loving parents.

Jonas straightened, holding his glass in the air toward their mother. “To Mother and Father.”

Everyone raised their glass, then took a drink. Leah watched Owen over the rim of her cup, but he didn’t part his lips. How long could he make a show of drinking without people becoming suspicious that his punch never dwindled within it?

After the toast, everyone went back to decorating, fixing the misshapen animals and tickling one another with the boughs. Leah walked over to Owen’s side, leaning back against the table.

“Did you not like the punch?”

He bent his face closer to hers and she pulled back just a bit farther. Why did he have to get so close?

He smiled. “It was most . . . refreshing.”

“Then let us finish our drinks together, shall we? We wouldn’t wish to seem rude to my mother after all.”

He narrowed his eyes, taking a slow breath. “Fine,” he quipped.

But when he reached forward for his glass, he grabbed hers and left *his* on the table.

“Wait, no, that’s not yours.” She looked at the tainted cup left beside her.

“No, I’m quite sure this is my glass. You are mistaken.”

“But really, that is mine.” She stood, reaching up and grasping the cup he still held in his hands.

Owen kept a tight grip. “Now, now, let us not cause a scene.” He plucked her fingers from the cup, shaking his head. “We don’t want to draw needless attention.”

“But that’s my cup.” She hated the whine in her voice, but she was feeling despondent.

He sighed. “I can tell you are new to the game of trickery. If I had been in your shoes, I would not have let my own cup out of my sight.”

“I am not drinking that,” Leah said, looking down at the tainted punch.

Owen lifted her cup to his lips, taking a dramatically-long and rather loud sip before smacking his lips together when he had finished. “Now *that* is delicious. But why won’t you drink your own?”

“Because it is not my own. It has been soiled by your lips.”

“I do not believe my lips are the problem.” He gave her a devilish grin, taking another careful sip as he kept his eyes locked on hers.

Oh dear. Her heart skipped a beat and her stomach swirled with—well, she wasn't quite sure with *what* it swirled, but she could not say it was unpleasant.

Owen leaned forward, and Leah felt as if she couldn't move. Her breathing stilled, and just as he got close enough for her to smell his shaving soap, he straightened, holding the cup of ruined punch in his hand in offering to her.

She cleared her throat, smoothing the front of her gown before reluctantly taking the cup. "Thank you."

"You are most welcome." He stood in quiet expectation, smiling as he waited.

She swallowed. Much as she hated to succumb to failure, she was also too proud to let Owen win in this moment. She squared her shoulders, then drank the contents of her cup within four large swallows.

Owen snorted out a laugh, leaning his hand on the table and bending his head to hide his face from the rest of the room. But he turned his head just enough that Leah could see his face, his hair tumbling over his brow. "That was magnificent. How did you manage that without spewing it across the room?"

She gave an involuntary swallow as the bitter liquid threatened to come back up, keeping her face stoic. "I am a lady, Mr. Turner. We do not spit."

He laughed again, and Leah could not hold it in anymore, joining alongside him. They laughed until everyone in the room stopped what they were doing and watched.

"What is so funny?" Rose asked.

Owen sat up, taking another drink. "Your eldest sister has just told me the most entertaining anecdote."

Leah smacked Owen on the shoulder with the back of her hand, scolding

him with her eyes. Now Rose would ask what the anecdote was, and Owen very well knew it.

He was correct. She *wasn't* as good at this as he was.

“He is teasing, Rose,” Leah said, standing and turning toward her. “I was laughing because Owen has admitted something rather embarrassing that I shall not dare relate out loud.”

Owen smothered a laugh, putting his hand over his mouth as he perched his other on his hip and looked to the floor.

Rose squealed. “I knew it! He likes you.”

Leah almost dropped her glass. She looked to Rose, unable to meet Owen’s eyes. Rose was merely a young girl thinking fanciful thoughts. Leah should not read into it more than that. Nor should she care. She was supposed to be loathing his very existence and making his life a living nightmare.

But she wasn’t. She found she had been rather enjoying their little moments together. But what would he make of her silence? Surely he would realize there was not much to say in response to such a statement. And instead of saying something she would come to regret, she decided to remain taciturn.

Owen sighed. “Well, it appears I have been found out.”

Leah looked up to him, her cheeks flaming. Rose squealed again, but soon became distracted by her previous task. Owen looked down at Leah and gave her a discreet wink.

Of course. It was all a game. As always.

Leah gave a weak smile in return. Why should she feel disappointment? She despised him. And he had clearly been teasing Rose. But now Leah was realizing that despise was too strong a word. As he had said, they were both older now. And different as well.

“Don’t worry,” Owen said, startling Leah from her thoughts. “I was only

teasing.”

“I knew that.” Leah put her cup back to her lips before realizing she had already finished drinking the awful punch. She set it back down, lightly touching her hair.

Owen’s mouth tightened and he nodded. “Good.”

Chapter 14

LEAH. EVENING OF THE THIRD DAY.



That evening, after arranging the greenery in a way more pleasing to the eye and less like misshapen animals, Leah found herself as far from Owen at the table as physically possible. Something that would have pleased her to no end only three days ago, yet now, she found herself watching him, wishing she was close enough to hear the things he was saying to make Jonas and Graham laugh.

“He has grown into a rather handsome man, hasn’t he?” Cecily gazed down the table at him.

Leah swallowed her bite, taking time to choose her words. “I suppose so.”

“Suppose?” Cecily scoffed. “Do not let your history with him cloud your vision. If I were in your shoes . . .” She let her words trail off as she lifted her cup and took a slow drink, watching Owen as she did so.

“Cecily,” Leah said with a laugh. “You cannot be serious.”

“Why not?” She shrugged. “Unless of course you are interested, then I shall be happy to allow you the honor.”

“What would father think?” Leah turned back to Owen. His laugh was infectious and his eyes crinkled around the corners as he smiled wide. What would it feel like to toy with the lock of hair that stubbornly fell over his brow whenever he tilted it to the side?

Owen’s eyes came to hers and she snapped her gaze away quick as a shot. When she dared to look back toward him, he was still watching her, smiling and raising his glass in salute.

“I believe he thinks you to be handsome as well,” Cecily said—her voice low.

Leah gave her head a quick shake. “Nonsense. He is only teasing me as he always does.”

“Except you are not children anymore.”

No. They certainly were not. “That is beside the point. Why should I believe his attentions are anything other than continued shenanigans from our youth?”

Cecily smiled. “Because of the way he is looking at you.”

Leah did not dare look again. If he was still watching her as Cecily let on, he might get the wrong idea. He was likely finding great amusement in making her blush with his forward attention. And she was not about to give him that satisfaction.

When the meal ended, the ladies all ventured to the drawing room with the gentlemen following a half hour later. The fire crackled away, offering not only a physical warmth, but also casting a comforting glow about the room. Leah’s father and Jonas entered the room, followed by Owen. Leah took in his appearance, her eyes trailing over his deep blue tailcoat and buff breeches.

Cecily was correct, of course. He had grown into one of the most handsome young men of her acquaintance. His eyes looked almost black in the dim light of the room, and when they fell on her, she was tempted to swim in them. Why did he do that? Keep her gaze instead of politely turning away as most men would do. But not Owen. He kept her gaze, almost as if challenging her to be the one to look away first.

As the men sat, Owen took the empty space beside Leah, leaning back into the settee until he had situated himself comfortably.

“My mouth still tastes horrid.” He kept his voice low so only she could hear, looking across the room at an empty chair instead of turning to her.

She chuckled, shaking her head. “Nonsense. I drank much more than you and my mouth tastes fine.”

Owen’s eyes dipped to her mouth before he glanced away, clearing his throat. He sat up and ran his hand through his brown hair. “Quite.”

He was acting strangely. “Quite?”

“Was dinner more to your liking this evening?” He ignored her question, moving on and settling himself back against the settee again, grabbing a pillow and playing with its tassels.

“It was. I enjoy lamb.”

Owen bobbed his head and an awkward silence ensued.

“Owen, are you all right? It is not like you to be at a lack of words.”

Deep brown eyes slowly dragged to hers, his brow pulled down. “I honestly don’t know.” His head dipped a little lower to focus on his fidgeting fingers.

Oh dear. Should she keep pressing him for more answers? Or just leave that ambiguous statement sitting in the taut air between them? Perhaps she was overthinking things. He might be worrying about his work or some such thing.

“Is this about work?” she pressed.

He leaned his head ever-so-slightly to the side. “In a matter of words.”

“I honestly cannot tell if you wish me to ask you what is going on or simply leave you be. If you would be so kind as to inform me which you would prefer, I would happily acquiesce.”

His eyes came back to hers. They were such a dark brown that in certain lights she would swear they were black. “I also do not know that.”

The rest of the evening, Owen was strangely silent. From time to time, he would chuckle at something Graham said or Rose did to entertain. But mostly, he stared at the little pillow in his hand in silent observation.

What Leah wouldn't give to know his thoughts. For more and more, he was filling her own.

Chapter 15

OWEN. MORNING OF THE FOURTH DAY.



As only teasing. You are not nearly so whiny now.”
“Not *nearly*? Do you mean to imply I am still a little whiny?”

He sighed, leaning his head back against the wall. “Actually, no. I find my feelings toward you have . . . changed.”

Leah bit her lip for a moment before turning her face to him. “Oh?”

“Well, not to say changed completely,” he began. He was unaccountably nervous all of a sudden. “I mean, I never *disliked* you. It was only while we were young and now we are *not* so young, and I have found whatever feelings I had before are changing and while that may seem to insinuate I had harsh feelings toward you before that is not quite what I mean . . .” Oh dear. His ears grew hot and his tongue felt too big to swallow and the slight perspiration under his collar made his neck itch. “What I mean to say,” he continued, taking a deep breath, “is that I have enjoyed this stay. And that

includes my time spent with you.” He fiddled with the spud in his grasp, keeping a close eye on it instead of looking at Leah’s face.

Suddenly, Owen felt a slap beneath his hand, successfully dislodging the potato into the air where Leah reached out and caught it. She smirked. “I have found I’ve enjoyed it as well.”

“Excuse me,” he said, smiling. “You cannot just steal that.” Owen reached over, taking her hand and trying to pry the potato from her as she laughed. She leaned away and his side pressed against hers as he attempted to get the spud back. Leah switched hands so it was even farther from him, holding it in the air above them.

Owen reached up, losing his balance. He braced his hand against the wall before he fell, successfully catching himself so that he hovered just above Leah. Neither of them spoke as they looked at each other, catching their breath after laughing. But neither of them was laughing now.

Owen’s eyes traced her face, and when her own gaze dipped to his lips, he leaned a bit closer. The darkness wrapped around them like a blanket, and Owen could make out a faint clanking from down the hall in the kitchen. But what had him most entranced was the way Leah couldn’t seem to catch her breath.

“Leah,” he whispered, looking down at her.

Her neck strained. “Yes?”

Owen’s heart raced and his hand trembled as he kept it braced against the wall. His arm tightened as he kept himself upright, leaning closer. Their eyes met, searching the other for unanswered questions. Their noses lightly brushed against each other as they neared and Leah’s palm skimmed over the hand he had planted firmly on the floor. Her eyes fluttered closed and he tilted his head . . .

“Owen!”

Owen jumped, his back hitting something solid, knocking over the sack of potatoes they had been crouched behind. “Blast,” he hissed. His fingers fumbled as he tried picking them up and putting them safely away.

“It’s Rose,” Leah said, bolting to her feet.

“Yes, I figured.”

“Owen?” Rose called out again.

Leah put a hand to her head as she paced in the tight confines. “Goodness, what had we been thinking? They are all looking for us.”

“Well, actually . . .” Owen kicked a loose spud that hadn’t made its way home yet.

Leah stopped her nervous hands. “What?”

“I may have told them that you decided not to play anymore.”

She scowled, leerily looking him over. “Why would you do that?”

Owen waited to listen and see if Rose was nearing, but he didn’t hear any more calls. “I wanted a little time alone with you.”

Suddenly, Rose’s smiling face popped into the doorframe. “I found you!”

Owen jumped yet again, looking back and forth between the two sisters—one watching him with a hesitant interest while the other smiled brightly. He cleared his throat. “Yes, you found me. How did you know I was hiding?”

“Because Jonas went to your room and you weren’t there.” Rose came farther into the larder. “Leah? What are you doing here?”

She glanced at Owen before turning to her sister. “I was hiding.”

“But Owen told us—”

“—why don’t we all go outside for a walk, hm? Get some fresh air?” Owen asked. “I find I could use some fresh air.”

Rose wrinkled her nose. “It is rather muddy outside. I just went out to

check.” She looked over to Leah. “But perhaps it is a good idea. Leah seems quite flushed.”

Leah’s eyes widened and she put the back of her hand to her cheek. “It is a rather small room. I’m sure that must be why.”

Rose raised her brow. “It is practically frigid in here.”

“I disagree,” Owen said. “It is a nice, warm temperature. Quite . . . balmy.”

Rose’s scowl deepened. “You are acting strange.”

A smile tugged at his lips and he looked over at Leah. “Yes. I suppose you could say that.”

“Well, I came looking for you because Jonas wanted to go for a ride and had wondered if you wished to go. I’m assuming you will say yes since you just said you could use fresh air.” Rose looked down to the ground.

“Yes, a ride sounds good.” Owen stepped over to Rose, chucking her chin up. “And then we shall have to read a proper Christmas story.”

Her smile immediately returned. “Oh, yes please!”

Owen went to walk from the room, stealing one last glance at Leah. “Until later, then?”

She nodded, a smile softening her lips. “Until later.”

Chapter 16

LEAH. EVENING OF THE FOURTH DAY.



Darkness had fallen over the estate, the temperature dropping and causing the soft ground to harden again. Earlier, her father, Jonas and Owen had fallen the yule log. While tradition recommended burning the large trunk of tree within the house, Leah's mother would hear none of it. Thus, they always waited until dark, gathering around a blazing bonfire, each of them sitting on smaller pieces of the trees as rustic benches. And then they would each try their turn at scaring the group.

Miranda and Rose were in their beds, cozy and awaiting Christmas morning as Owen and the rest of the siblings sat in the wagon, making their way to the back of the estate where servants already had the yule log burning. Leah could see the slight orange flicker as the wagon swayed over the hills and bumped atop the uneven ground.

Owen sat across from her, and when the siblings were busy talking, he would steal glances toward her. Leah wasn't sure how to react when he

smiled at her. Everything was still so fresh after this afternoon, and she had ruminated on what had happened every second of every minute from then until now. But she still couldn't quite understand how she had moved from loathing Owen's existence only four days ago, to wherever her heart seemed to be now. Somehow, her exacting revenge had drawn them closer together instead of dividing them further.

How very strange.

"I cannot wait to sit beside the fire," Graham said, his shoulder pressed against hers. The wagon was not very large. "It is freezing out here."

"You say that every year." Cecily laughed, hunched up beside Jonas. The lantern offered a soft light, the shadows continuously shifting as it swayed with the horses' movements.

Owen was pressed against the wagon, on Jonas' other side, and at the moment he seemed to be studying the passing trees.

"I expect a very scary story from you tonight." Leah had to break the tension. It was becoming unbearable. He hadn't spoken a word to her since they had almost kissed in the larder. Her skin warmed despite the chill of the air. She could remember vividly how his breath had tickled her face, how his hand had tensed under her touch and how his eyes seemed black in the dark room, staring at her with an intensity that left no denial of what had been about to happen.

He had been going to kiss her.

Owen turned to her with a smile. "If I do not give you goosebumps, I will return home in utter defeat."

"You all have very different ideas of scary." Graham sighed. "To me, loss of an estate due to bad investments is much scarier than ghosts or apparitions."

Jonas barked out a laugh. “Is that why you slept on the floor of my room last year? You were afraid Father would lose our entire estate suddenly on Christmas Eve?”

Graham rolled a shoulder. “It could happen.”

“Very doubtful though,” Cecily added. “Considering the feast we ate the very next day.”

“All the more reason to fear losing everything.” Graham raised his chin. “That meal must have cost a fortune.”

As Jonas and Cecily continued to barrage Graham with teasing, Leah let herself turn back to Owen. But, he was happily watching her siblings exchange.

Perhaps they had only misunderstood each other as children. She had been rather moody and he had been—well—a young, silly boy. And she had to admit, letting go was rather fun.

The wagon halted as it neared the fire. Jonas and Owen jumped down, and Owen stood beside it, his hand raised as he offered to help her from the wagon. Her palm slid over the back of his hand and all the feelings from earlier pounded in her chest. When she stepped onto the crusted earth, her fingers held his for a moment. Their eyes met with a snap, Owen’s thumb running along her knuckles.

Leah took a quivering breath as she slid her hand up his arm, allowing him to lead her over to the fire. The snow was gone, but the grass gave a slight crunch under their feet. The darkness offered a certain privacy, allowing them to use it to stay near one another as they walked. Jonas, Cecily and Graham were already situated when they made it to the fire. Logs surrounded the roaring fire and Owen took a seat directly beside her, the log being a perfect length for just two.

“So, who shall go first?” Jonas asked, standing across the fire from her and Owen.

Leah smiled. “You, of course. It is tradition.”

Jonas hunched over, holding his arm in front of his face. “It all began on a night, very much like this one. A young family sat around the fire—laughing, smiling, enjoying the season and its festivities. Until a cool wind swept in, snuffing out the burning flames . . .”

As Jonas told his story, Graham straightened in his seat, trying to look brave. But anytime a rustle sounded in the brush behind them or someone did anything so much as *move*, he would flinch. Cecily leaned her elbows on her legs, smiling as Jonas did his best to scare them all.

Leah felt something brush against her back, and she jolted forward on her seat.

“Shhh.” Owen leaned near her ear. “It’s just me.”

“Oh.” Leah settled herself back, balancing on the log. Owen’s arm was stretched out behind her and she glanced at him to see if he would move it. But he only looked on to Jonas as he wrapped up his story, leaving his arm behind her as if to gently hold her up.

“—And every year when the full moon shone, they were all left with the memory of that night.” Jonas bowed at the end of his story, and they all offered their applause.

“Not bad, Jonas. But not enough to frighten me.” Graham shrugged.

“Please.” Cecily scoffed. “I could see the beads of nervous sweat on your brow from all the way over here.”

“The fire is hot,” Graham defended.

“Whatever makes you feel better, Graham.” Jonas placed a consoling hand on Graham’s shoulder before looking around at their faces. “So, who is

next?”

“I will go.” Owen’s arm snaked from behind her, trailing across her back and leaving a pleasant chill in its wake. He stood, rubbing his hands together. “And I have just the thing.” The faces around the fire all turned to him. Owen let silence fill the air for almost a full minute before tucking his hands into his cloak and looking to the ground. “His skin was white.” His eyes slowly lifted and stared absently at the fire. “As white as the snow that still hovers beneath the trees this very night.” His head seemed to float from side to side as he took a slow, deep breath. “If only she had known what he was. What he was capable of. But she only saw the face of an Adonis. A man so alluring she could not help but stare.”

Silence reigned as they all watched, captivated by the way Owen told the story. His movements were fluid, his words filled with inflection and his eyes glanced about as if worried such a man might produce himself at any moment.

“And one night, when the moon was shadowed by dark clouds creeping across the sky, he came to her. ‘You are too beautiful to walk alone,’ he said to her. ‘You must allow me to take you home.’ The woman agreed, excitement filling every part of her being.”

Leah watched, almost in a trance as he told his tale. She could not deny it was a rather chilling story. But as he told it, she watched the way the fire seemed to constantly change his appearance. One moment his brow was shadowed and his eyes lit, and the next, his whole face seemed to glow in the flickering light. It only added to the eeriness of his tale.

Owen reached down, grabbing a branch and watching it as he traced the tip along the ground. “When they came to an alleyway, the man stopped.” The twig in his grasp snapped as he pressed it into the ground, causing every one

of them to jump. Owen's face gave way to a quick smile before returning to its stoic state. "He told her of her exquisite beauty and that she was above all other women, having entranced him so fully that he needed her—if only to continue breathing. Seduced by his words and looks, she followed him, not knowing what fate would befall her. She did not care. His beauty and compliments captivated her in such a way that her thoughts were few."

Cecily's eyes were wide and she leaned forward. "Then what happened?"

Owen slowly slid his gaze over to her. "They walked into the shadows, but the young woman was never seen again." He stood in a heavy silence before taking his seat beside Leah. He leaned over, whispering. "So, Leah—"

She turned toward him, bringing their faces only inches apart. Neither of them spoke, and the same tension from earlier crackled in the small space between them.

The chords in Owen's neck strained as he swallowed. "Are you scared?"

Leah took a quivering breath. "Terrified."

Chapter 17

OWEN. CHRISTMAS. THE FIFTH DAY.



Christmas morning began with dark clouds smattering the sky, but they soon broke free and allowed the sun to shine. The day passed similarly to the others, but Owen hadn't found a moment to speak with Leah. Tomorrow he would leave and there wasn't much time left to decide what he was to do with these new feelings. She felt it too. That much he was sure of. He wasn't imagining the stolen and lingering glances, nor had he imagined the look in her eye when he had almost kissed her yesterday. And he meant to do something about it if it was the only thing he accomplished that day.

The Cluetts were to join them for dinner that evening to celebrate together. That meant Leah's friend Amelia would likely be occupying much of her time and attention. Now, he would need to patiently wait for the meal to be over and try to find a moment alone.

He readied for dinner with more care than usual, fussing with his hair and cravat so much that he was almost late to the table. Leah watched him as he

strode down the staircase, with a young lady standing beside her. Likely Miss Cluett.

“Good evening,” Owen said, coming over to them.

The friend discreetly raised a brow, turning to Leah with a grin.

Leah cleared her throat. “Amelia, this is our family’s friend, Mr. Turner. Mr. Turner, this is Miss Amelia Cluett.”

Owen dipped his head. “A pleasure, Miss Cluett. A friend of the Thompsons is a friend of mine.”

Miss Cluett dipped into a curtsey. “A pleasure to be sure.” She glanced at Leah from the corner of her eye.

“For all our sakes, I hope that the meal is more to Miss Thompson’s liking. She was rather displeased with the courses a few nights ago.”

“Oh?” Miss Cluett smiled.

“Yes. They served not only pea soup, but a rather colorful aspic as well. She was rather disappointed.”

Miss Cluett laughed. “Yes, well, Leah does hate those very things.”

Leah brought her eyes to his and he longed to take her hand. To whisper in her ear how beautiful she looked tonight. All day long he had wished for a private audience and time seemed to be slipping from his hands like sand through an hourglass.

He had a job to return to but he couldn’t simply leave things as they were between the two of them. Nor did he think he was capable of going back to thinking of her as Jonas’ vexing sister.

She was his counterpart. The push to his pull.

Owen couldn’t stand it anymore, stepping to Leah and gently touching her shoulder as he led her to the edge of the room.

She glanced back at her friend before giving him her attention. “Owen,

what are you doing?”

“I need to see you this evening.”

She couldn't meet his eyes, keeping her eyes to the floor. “For what purpose?”

“I need to say a few things before I leave tomorrow.” Owen watched Jonas walk across the room, standing beside Miss Cluett as he kept a keen eye on Owen and Leah as they spoke.

“Yes.” Leah sighed. “You leave tomorrow. So perhaps we should not be meeting this evening for that very reason.”

He reached forward to take her hand, stopping himself when he caught Jonas' eye again. They were being watched. “Please. I need to talk to you.”

Leah pulled her shoulders straighter, finally giving a small nod. “Very well. Tonight in the drawing room?”

“No.”

She furrowed her brow.

Owen spared Jonas another quick glance. His time alone now could easily come to an end if Jonas felt the need to interrupt. “I mean to say, I would rather meet in the library.”

“Graham might be there you realize. He tends to read at all hours of the night.”

He winced. “I forgot. Very well. How about the conservatory?”

Her eyes widened. “That seems *very* private.”

“Precisely,” he said, nodding.

Dinner was announced, startling Leah and Owen from their gaze. Jonas finally walked over, offering Leah his arm and leading her into the dining room. Owen followed suit, walking to Cecily and then leading them to their seats.



The hall was dark, but Owen had a taper in hand to guide him through the maze that was Stonehill, until he finally found himself at the conservatory. Was Leah already here? Waiting on the other side of the door?

“Owen.”

He jerked at the soft hiss, spinning around to find Leah striding down the hall toward him. He put a hand over his racing heart. “Leah, you scared me half to death.”

A smile formed on her lips as she walked up to him. “Good. That is what you get for giving me nightmares last evening.”

“I would rather you have a different type of dream concerning me.” He grinned, but her smile faltered.

“What was it you wished to discuss?”

“Can you really be naive to my reason?” He reached a hand forward, taking her fingers lightly in his grasp, running his thumb over her smooth skin.

“I . . . I don’t think this is a good idea, Owen.”

“Ah.” He dropped her hand, taking a small step back. He ran his fingers up into his hair before meeting her eyes once more. “And might I ask why?”

She gave a shy shrug. “It has only been five days. Surely what you wish to speak of has only been imagined.”

“By both of us?” Owen stepped over to a window, placing his taper on the sill before turning back to her and just as he did, she spun about so she no longer faced him.

“We were swept away in the moment. That is all.”

“So you *do* feel it.”

Slowly, she turned back to him. “Just because I admit it does not mean it is wise to act upon. We hated each other only five days ago!”

He forced a smile. Hate her? He had never hated her. While she drove him mad, he had always had a fondness for her as he did every member of the Thompson family. And it made him sad to think that she thought he had hated her all these years. “I never hated you, Leah. You frustrated me, yes. But it was never anything so serious as hate.”

“That may be so, but perhaps I hated *you*.” Her words wavered as he stepped nearer.

He put his hand under her chin, tilting her head up. “No, I don’t believe you did.”

“You do not know my feelings. It is possible you were overconfident to ask me to meet you here tonight.”

“I believe I know exactly what you are feeling. Do you not remember what happened only yesterday?”

Her eyes instantly dropped to his lips.

“Yes,” he said. “It seems you do.”

“This is madness,” she whispered.

“Nonsense.” His thumb caressed her jawline as he grinned. “The mistletoe requires it.”

“What?” She tilted her head back, looking above them. She gasped as she found the mistletoe just above them. “How did that get there?”

“I am very good at such things, remember? But, truthfully, even if it weren’t there, all I would be able to think about at this moment is how much I want to kiss those lips that keep throwing insults my way.”

She looked back down at him, her breathing shallow. “So, what are you waiting for?”

He smiled, slipping his hand around her neck, leaning in and pressing his lips against hers. They both paused—as if silently acknowledging that their relationship had shifted and would never be the same. Owen used his hand to tilt Leah’s face, bringing them closer and allowing their lips to settle more comfortably.

He couldn’t make sense of it all. Only five days ago they were bickering and now they were kissing in the hall by the light of the moon and one small taper that constantly flickered—like it was too small and was fighting to stay lit. But fire could grow, just as it seemed to do between Leah and Owen the last few days. What may have started as a fire of anger, grew and consumed until they were only left with the truth.

They were meant for each other.

That became more and more clear to him as their lips caressed each other, moving slowly but with a fire he had never experienced before. It was as if his stomach was in his chest and his heart would burst if they stopped.

Owen felt a small jerk, realizing they had pushed themselves against the wall. “I’m sorry,” he whispered against her lips.

She pulled back just enough to speak. “I’m not.” Then her lips crashed back to his, her hands running along his shoulders until they seemed to find solace, intertwining into his hair. His eyes rolled behind his lids and he took her waist in his hands. He hooked one arm around her middle, using the other hand to hold him steady against the wall. Could kissing someone make them drunk? For if so, that was certainly what he was experiencing. The darkness behind his lids seemed to swirl, with random bursts of light flashing whenever Leah’s lips moved against his. His head felt heavy, his neck hot and his heart was racing away.

Leah’s hands came to his cheeks, cradling his face and gently pulling him

back. Owen wanted to protest, but something about the look in her eye made him pause.

“What is the matter?” His eyes flitted between hers, concern filling his chest.

She swallowed, letting her hands fall. “This is all so sudden. What if it isn’t real? What if we are only caught up in the moment?”

“No,” he said, shaking his head. He reached up, twirling one of her now frazzled curls around his finger to restore it to its former neat and tidy ringlet. “We have known each other much longer than five days, Leah. I know you better than any other girl of my acquaintance.”

“But not like this. We were always at each other’s throats.”

As she said it, he pressed his nose to the tender skin of her neck, giving her a soft kiss.

“Not like that,” she breathed, chuckling and pushing him back.

He shrugged, keeping his hands wrapped about her. “We have both matured. I don’t find it so very strange.”

“I just . . .” She stopped.

His gaze washed over her face, trying to read her feelings. And what he found there made his heart heavy. “Are you saying you want me to step back?”

“I’m saying we need more time.” She placed a hand against his chest. “And with you leaving tomorrow, we will be able to see if this is real. If we cannot bear to be apart, then we will know it is not something we imagined. But if we forget . . .” She trailed off, not finishing the thought. She knew he would be able to fill in the empty void she left.

“I don’t like it.”

Leah laughed, her smile lighting up her face before sobering. “I think it is

for the best.”

Owen nodded, not wanting to admit she was right while still seeing reason in her words. But when someone felt like love was sprouting out of their chest, they hardly wished for reason. Though, he also did not want her to have regrets. If she chose him because she felt obligated after this night, then he would never forgive himself. This way, they could step back and see if their feelings remained unchanged after a bit of time apart. It made sense.

But if it made sense, why did it make his heart ache?

Chapter 18

LEAH. PARTING DAY.



Leah watched as Owen stepped into his carriage. This was necessary. For one, this had been the plan all along—for him to leave today. And two, it would give them time to assess their feelings and see if they desired to go forward or keep things as they were. Though, she could not deny that they could never completely go back to the way they were. She would never be able to see him again and not remember how soft his lips had been or how sweetly he had held her. While he might still be silly and like to tease her, he was not unkind. Rather the opposite in fact. He was sweet even when she was barraging him with insults and tricks. But he took it all in stride, joining her in their little game, but not out of malice. He simply enjoyed being a part of their family.

“Are you sad?” Cecily came up beside her, watching out the window as Owen’s carriage took off.

“Why would I be?”

Cecily shook her head. "I am not blind. I can see how you feel about him. And he about you. But if you do not wish to confide in your closest sister . . ." She grinned, raising her brow.

"He was only here for five days, Cecily. That is hardly enough time to know one's heart."

"Posh." Cecily waved her off. "You have known him your entire life. Who do you know better other than our own brothers?"

That was just what Owen had pointed out, but she stood by what she said. "If, after he has been gone for a time, I still find myself thinking of him, then I will better understand myself. This has been rather unsettling."

Cecily turned around and sat on the edge of the window. "You were both at such a formable age before. Now, you are adults. I believe it is natural to have different feelings for one another."

Leah smiled, jutting out her chin. "Then I suppose we will just have to wait and see."



Leah. Five days later.

How could time move so slowly? Leah had never remembered a twelfth night that was less enjoyable. It did not matter that Amelia had come to stay after Leah had been unable to make the trip the week prior. Yes, she did offer a certain comfort, but all Leah found herself talking about was Owen. Owen this and Owen that. Eventually, Amelia had had enough and gently told Leah that she would pack her trunks and leave if Leah was not able to find a single

other topic of discussion. And that was saying something, for Amelia loved nothing more than to talk of eligible gentlemen.

The evenings were filled with cards and games, and Leah kept playing the wrong thing as her mind was otherwise occupied with how much Owen would have loved it. He would have done every single thing Rose requested of him, played every hand of cards, participated in every song sung. And without him, the same things that she had once enjoyed, now seemed lacking.

Every day she checked the correspondence to see if he had perhaps sent her a letter, saying he felt the same. But every day the post came and there was nothing from him. She really only had herself to blame—telling him that they needed time apart. But surely that did not mean they could not communicate at all. He could have at least sent a quick note, saying that she filled his thoughts incessantly, without tiring or without ceasing. Or, that her face filled his mind so fully that he could not see anything else, making work impossible, and causing him to take to his bed frequently because it was simply too much to bear. Surely that was not too much for a girl to expect.

Finally, on the second day of the new year, a letter arrived from Mr. Owen Turner. Unfortunately, it was annoyingly addressed to her father. She trailed after him, doing her best to seem unsuspecting, all the while attempting to read over his shoulder.

He turned around, his brow furrowed. “Is something the matter, Leah?”

“Oh, nothing. I was only wondering if Owen made it home safely.”

Her father nodded, raising the letter back up as he reread a portion. “Yes, it seems so. He wished to thank your mother and I for having him and expresses his hope to visit again soon.”

“Soon?” She tried not to sound eager, but judging by her father’s quizzical brow, she was not succeeding. “How soon?” She looked down at the toe of

her shoe, making a great show of examining it so her father could see just how disinterested she was with his answer.

He folded the letter up. "It did not say."

"What?" Her shoulders sagged.

Her father narrowed an eye as he watched her odd behavior. "Did you expect something different?"

"I only thought he was a more precise man than that. It is not polite to give notice of company but no details as to when to expect it. It is rather like saying you owe a bill, but not being told when it is due. How can one prepare for it?"

He smiled, patting her shoulder. "I do not believe his visit will be a hardship. Rather the opposite in fact. He keeps all of you so busy that I get a bit of a break while he is here." And then he had the nerve to walk off with a smile on his face.

A visit? But no word as to when? The last week had been a torment. Yes, she had wanted time to evaluate her heart, but now she wondered if she hadn't had as profound an effect on him as he'd had on her. Because she could think of nothing else other than when he would next visit and put an end to her agony.

Chapter 19

LEAH. TOO FORLORN TO TELL ONE DAY FROM THE NEXT.



Leah had decided to try and immerse herself into helping Rose with her needlepoint over the next few days. Rose hated to take the time to do it, but also wished to improve. So here they were.

“What are you stitching, Leah?” Rose leaned over to peer at the pillowcase Leah was embroidering.

“Nothing relevant.”

Rose squinted. “It looks like a heart.”

“Oh?” Leah stabbed her needle through the cotton fabric, slowly pulling the thread back through. “I had not really planned on it, but I suppose you are correct. It does resemble a heart.”

“Not planned?” Rose dropped her little embroidering board into her lap with a scowl. “How is that even possible?”

“I know how,” Cecily sang from the settee across from them.

Miranda folded her book shut. “If Leah is unaware, then how do you know?”

“Because I am very astute.” Cecily grinned over at her.

“Or,” Leah continued, “I had been trying to stitch a rose and simply forgot what I was doing.”

“But you said you did not know.” Rose seemed more confused than ever, her eyebrows forming a tight V at her brow. “So do you know or not?”

“I now remember. It was supposed to be a rose.”

“Are you stitching it for me? It is a lovely little pillow cover.”

Leah smiled, returning to her stitching. “Say the word and it is yours.”

A door creaked and all four ladies turned toward the sound. Their butler came just inside the morning room. “Mr. Turner is here to see you, Miss Thompson.”

Leah’s hands stilled while her sisters all erupted into a fit of giggles. “Shush,” she scolded them over her shoulder. She did not need Owen hearing their laughs and thinking she had told them everything. The only one she had confided the details to was Cecily, and she had been careful to leave the more colorful parts out.

“Can we stay?” Rose stood as Cecily held a hand out to her. Rose took it, but waited to see what Leah would have to say.

“I don’t honestly know,” Leah admitted. She had no context to go on other than Owen was here and with the apparent reason of seeing her. But what if he did not wish for a private audience and all her sisters scattered, making the event awkward or uncomfortable?

Leah turned to tell them they could stay, but they were already to the side door. All she saw were Miranda’s dark curls as her sisters turned into the hall opposite from where their butler had announced Owen’s arrival.

And when she turned back to the door, Owen stood there watching her.

“Owen, what an unexpected and pleasant surprise.” She smiled, her hands wrapped so tightly around each other that she was afraid they may never come apart again.

He smirked, coming farther into the room. “I was hoping you would say that. But, truthfully, I wasn’t quite sure what to expect.”

“Why would I not be pleased?”

He shrugged. “I was not sure if I allowed you enough time.”

“Oh.” She swallowed—her neck tight. How did she go about not seeming overzealous? After telling him she needed more time but spending every waking moment after he left thinking of nothing but him? Though, isn’t that what she had wanted? Was that not her answer? If she had not thought of him after his leaving, she would have taken that to mean it had only been a temporary thing. But that was not what had happened.

Not at all.

He looked at the window, kicking his foot against the floor. “So, have I? Given you enough time, that is?”

“I will admit it has not been very many days,” she said lightly. There. Her answer was not a lie. She said not many days. Though it had felt like a lifetime since last seeing him.

He bobbed his head, working his mouth. “I suppose it felt like a long time to me, so I thought perhaps it had to you as well. But if not, I shall go and see what Jonas is doing.” Instead of turning to leave, he brought his gaze up to her, hope hiding in his eyes.

“Then I suppose I must admit . . .” She paused. “It felt much longer than one week to me as well.”

His mouth quirked into a shy grin. “How much longer?”

“I cannot say for sure.” She reached down, running her finger along the arm of the settee as she kept her gaze from his. “But I found myself going quite mad.”

He strode ahead, closing the gap between them in a flash and putting his hand to the back of her head. Owen did not even need to pull her closer for a kiss, for she immediately leaned into him. Their lips crashed together, and Owen’s free hand splayed across her back as the other gently slid from her hair down her neck. She threw her arms about his shoulders, standing on the tips of her toes as his mouth slid from her lips to her cheek, placing a lingering kiss there.

Owen pulled back, smiling. “I was rather hoping you would say that.”

“I can see.” She grinned up at him, his boyish smile lifting her heart as he gazed at her.

“Do you think you can manage being married to a merchant?”

Leah ran her finger over the corner of his lip where a small bit of rouge showed. “Well, that depends. Who is the man of mention?”

He threw his head back with a laugh before coming back and nuzzling her neck. “Do not tease me.”

“Is that not what we did the entirety of your visit?”

“Yes.” He sighed, his breath tickling her neck before he pulled back to look at her. “But this is so much more important than a silly prank. This is my future. Or rather, I hope, our future.” He toyed with her fingers, gently clasped in his hands.

“I think,” she began. “That a glassmaker would be the perfect occupation for my intended. Don’t you?”

Closing his eyes, Owen pressed his brow against hers. “Yes. I find that would suit me perfectly.”

“And this is not another of your tricks?”

He slowly turned his head, his brow rubbing against hers. “Not a chance.”

Epilogue

OWEN. ONE YEAR LATER.



They all stared at the table. “Jonas Thompson. That looks nothing like a stag.” Owen leaned against the table, shaking his head as he tried to rearrange the greenery.

“Must we even have animals?” Rose sat in a chair, looking on and judging their work thus far.

“It is our wedding day,” Owen continued. “Leah will be most disappointed if she comes to the table and not one animal shape is to be found.”

“I rather think she will not care,” Cecily said. She stood from her chair. “I had better go upstairs. Leah will not be pleased if I am not ready to go on time.” She glared at Owen and Jonas. “Don’t you think it best if you two do the same?”

Jonas waved her off. “I can be ready in ten minutes.”

“Ha!” Rose leaned her elbows on the table, propping herself up. “You spend ten minutes on your hair alone.”

“Come now. Give him some credit.” Owen walked over and put a hand to Jonas’ shoulder as if to defend him. “I’m sure it is much more like twenty minutes.”

Jonas pulled back with a smile, raising a fist. “Do not make me give you a black eye on your wedding day. Leah would never forgive either of us.”

Miranda rushed into the room, her eyes wide. “What are all of you doing? We leave for the church in less than an hour!”

“I am ready,” Graham said. He walked into the room with a decisive air of superiority, his chin tipped up.

“Of course you are,” Rose said with a scoff. She jumped from her seat, dashing out of the room, Cecily hurrying just behind her.

Owen’s heart warmed as he watched everyone go about their tasks. Not only would all these lovely people be his family in heart, but now they would be his legal family . . . forever.

Cecily leaned back through the doorway. “What are you waiting for? Go get ready,” she scolded before rushing back out.

“She must be talking to you,” Owen said to Jonas. “I was ready before I arrived.”

“A bit excited, were you?” Jonas smiled, slapping him on the back.

“I have been ready since eight this morning.”

“Eight? Why such a horridly early hour?”

Owen shrugged, grinning. “I find that even renting a home nearby isn’t close enough. I want to be wherever Leah is.”

Jonas rolled his eyes, then turned and left the room, presumably to do as his sisters insisted and get himself ready. But what Jonas did not know was that Owen had a reason to be up early this morning. He only hoped everything went according to plan.

Within the hour, all members of the family loaded into the carriages, heading to the local parish. Owen's father rode with him, cramming into the tight space with Jonas, Graham and Mr. Thompson, which made for a rather uncomfortable ride.

When they arrived, Owen threw the carriage door open and strode into the church, anxious to take his place at the altar. Close friends and relatives filed through the door, moving far too slow for Owen's liking. He tapped his fingers against his leg, his gaze darting over the faces, then shifting to the stained-glass windows, then back to the wedding guests. He hadn't anticipated this kind of nervous energy. What did he have to fret over?

His nerves came grinding to a halt when the doors to the church opened, and Leah stood there with a halo of light surrounding her. Owen's chest tightened as he watched her walk into the church, her blonde hair in a simple chignon, partially covered by her bonnet. His eyes washed over her soft cream-colored dress and pale pink spencer.

She was stunning.

Leah smiled as she walked toward him. He swallowed down a lump that formed in his throat as she glided down the aisle. To him. When she made it to the altar, he took her hand, wanting nothing more than to pull it to his lips for a kiss. But all eyes were watching them, so he thought it best to avoid such temptations for the time being.

The priest began the ceremony, and Owen did his best to pay attention, but his mind was buzzing and he could hardly tell how much time had passed since he arrived at the small white church. After today, he would no longer have to worry if he was intruding upon the Thompson's hospitality, visiting nearly every day. Starting from this day on, he would get to be with this amazing woman always.

He and Leah shared a smile, then turned back to the priest as he spoke. Before Owen knew it, they were pronounced man and wife.

They turned to the small crowd, and Owen raised his and Leah's clasped hands in the air before pulling her down the aisle with him. The air was crisp outside, and a carriage awaited to take them to their celebratory breakfast.

"Owen, wait," Leah said, laughing. She pulled his hand, bringing him to a stop.

"What?"

"Are you not going to kiss me on our wedding day?"

He looked behind her where their friends and family were exiting the church. "Here? In front of everyone?"

Leah lifted her hand, pointing to the carriage. "You must. The mistletoe demands it."

Owen turned around, and sure enough, just above the carriage door was a sprig of mistletoe. He grinned. "Well, I suppose if tradition requires it."

They ran over to the carriage door, and when they arrived just below the festive plant, Owen wrapped his arms around Leah's waist, picking her up off the ground and kissing her. Leah pulled back, smiling as he gently placed her feet on the ground.

He grinned down at her. "Was that satisfactory?"

"Yes." Leah ran her hand over his cheek. "But I shall require many more before the day is done."

He kept his grip on her waist, sparing the guests around the door a brief glance. "Do you think we could sneak away before joining everyone at your parent's house for breakfast?"

Her mouth turned down. "I suppose. Whatever for?"

"Because I wish to show my wife our home. Is that so strange?"

“No. It is rather sweet, actually.”

A smile crept across his lips. “Now let us get you home.” Owen squeezed her hand. “Our home.”

The carriage ride was short, quickly bringing them to Owen’s small rented house. He held his hand out to Leah to help her down.

“Now,” he said, waiting for her to face the house. “I know it isn’t much, but we shan’t be here very long. I plan to have great success in my next shop and purchase you something much more grand.”

Leah’s thumb stroked his hand. “I do not need anything grand. I married you because I love you.”

Owen smiled. “Would you follow me?” He gestured toward the door.

Leah chuckled, dipping into a curtsey. “Why of course.”

They both rushed into the house, laughing as they went room to room, stealing kisses in nearly every corner of the cozy house. When they arrived at Owen’s room, now to be *their* room, he held his hand up.

“What?” Leah stopped just short of the door. “Can I not see our room?”

“Of course you can. I only wanted to walk in first.”

Leah furrowed her brow, watching him curiously. “Very well. You go first.”

He took both of her hands, backing through the doorway. “Are you ready?”

“I suppose . . .”

As they stepped into the room, Owen reached up to the small rope he had finagled earlier that morning. It had been a rather difficult ordeal, but it would be well worth it when he saw Leah’s face.

He gave the rope a tug—and nothing happened.

Owen gave a nervous laugh. “Excuse me. Just a minor hiccup.” Then he gave the rope another tug, and this time, he felt the corner of the sheet above

them give way.

Hundreds of little papers, their edges cut to resemble snowflakes, fluttered down from the ceiling. Leah's face lit up, holding her hands out with a smile as she caught several of them. Some of the homemade snowflakes fell on her head and shoulders, while many floated down to the wood floor.

"Owen," Leah said with a laugh. "What is all of this?"

He took a step closer, picking a hand-cut snowflake off her shoulder. "Let us see, shall we?" Owen gave the paper a dramatic snap. "'My dearest Leah. The last day has been a torment, and I fear it is all your doing.' Ah, this must be one of the early ones." He smiled at her before continuing. "'Your request seemed logical at the time, but I must admit that my lovesick heart does not care for it.'"

Leah took one of the notes she had caught, flipping it over to read it. "You wrote all of these? And then cut the edges yourself?"

"I did."

Leah cleared her throat, her eyes welling with tears as she put the letter to her chest. She swallowed, taking several moments before she spoke. "Thank you, Owen. I love it. Truly I do." She sniffed.

"I had to do something with my time. I was going quite mad."

She ran over to him, throwing her arms around his neck. "Thank you. Thank you from the bottom of my heart."

Owen held her, nestling his face into her neck, trailing kisses up to her ear. "Shall we leave then? Our families will be expecting us."

Leah pulled back, wiping her eyes with the edge of her sleeve. "Of course. But I must say, this is my favorite of all your pranks."

"I had rather thought it would be." He cradled her face in his palm. "I love you, Leah Turner." Owen's voice caught as he spoke her married name aloud

for the first time. He cleared his throat, rubbing his thumbs along her cheeks.
“With all of my heart.”

Leah stood up on her toes, placing a soft kiss against his lips before pulling back with a soft sigh. “I love you too, Owen Turner.”

They leaned close, kissing amidst Owen’s words of adoration sprinkled around them on the floor. But his words seemed like they would never be enough. Luckily, he had a lifetime to try and express what she meant to him.

Also By

An Improper Agreement

An Improper Gentleman

An Improper Scheme